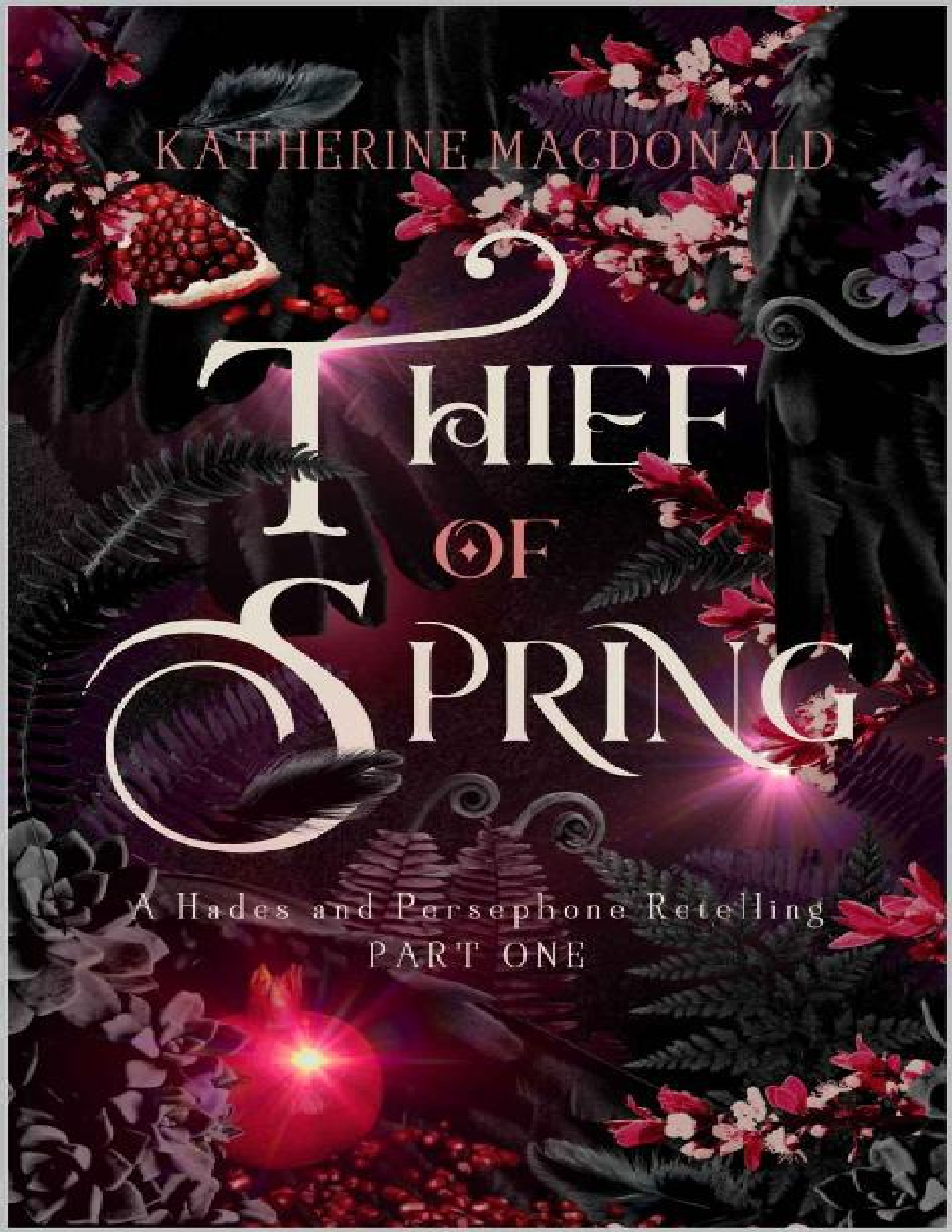
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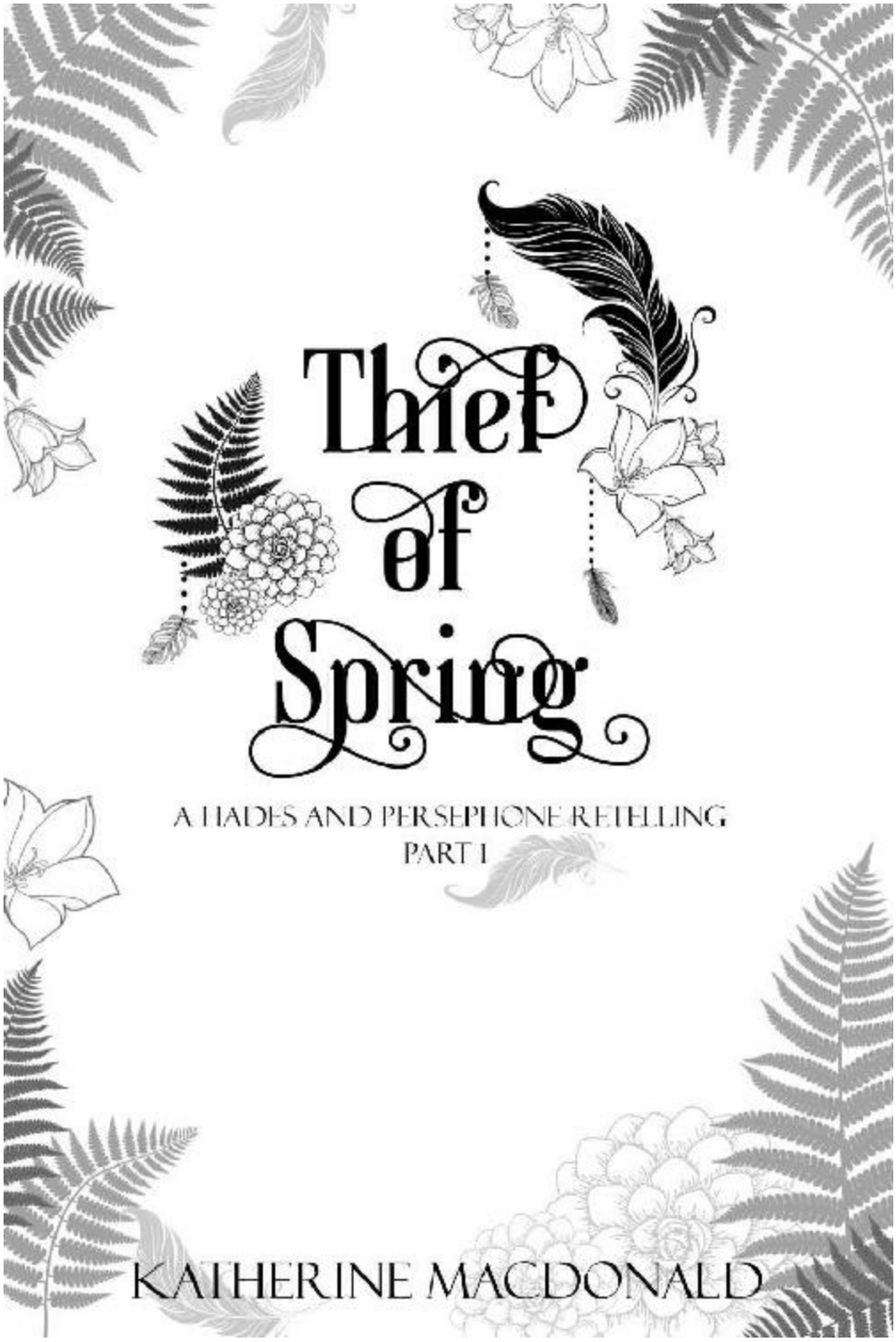
THIEF OF SPRING
A Hades and Persephone Retelling
PART ONE



Thief of Spring

A HADES AND PERSEPHONE RETELLING
PART 1

KATHERINE MACDONALD

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"Reach me a gentian, give me a torch! Let me guide myself with the blue, forked torch of a flower down the darker and darker stairs, where blue is darkened on blueness even where Persephone goes, just now, from the frosted September to the sightless realm where darkness is awake upon the dark."

-D. H. Lawrence-

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It is eight PM and already the streets of London are flooded with monsters.

Werewolves, mummies, zombies and ghosts drift beneath my window in the milky lamplight, howling, crowing, jeering. They move between the bright apple-red buses as if they're untouchable, invincible creatures, and not fragile mortals hiding in the gossamer dark.

Well, not just monsters. There's a few slutty cats too. One or two hot witches. A drunk pirate with a very authentic beard.

I sip my hot chocolate, the cool October air nipping at my pale, freckled skin, and inch forward on my windowsill.

I can never work out if I like Halloween or not.

I certainly like the costumes. I like the dancing. I like going anywhere there's silly-themed food and great decorations.

I don't much care for the drunkenness, the cheap plastic outfits, or any of the *wildness* that comes from it. When people wear masks, they forget who they really are.

Or the mask becomes a part of them. Just for the night.

A small pebble pings against the concrete roof. I look over the side of the fire escape, mindful of my potted plants. My best friend Libby stands on the pavement below, dressed to the nines in fishnet stockings, a crushed velvet jacket, and high-heeled boots.

"Persephone, Persephone, let down your hair!" she cackles, and I wonder if she's drunk too. There's a kind of glazed look in her expression, visible even from a distance and underneath her heavily-made up eyes.

I sigh, shuffling three stories down the fire escape to extend the ladder. She darts up easily, her red lips pursed into a casual smile. Too steady to be drunk.

"You're mixing up your myths. Ancient Greek mythology with nineteenth-century Germanic folklore? What would my father say?"

"Ugh," Libby groans, heading up the steps. "I don't know. But it would be super-boring. And I would not listen."

We reach the top of the building again and sit down in my little roof garden. It's just a narrow snatch of space at the top of a converted coach house that my own apartment backs onto. I'm not even sure it's really ours, but since no one else has access to it unless they climb up the fire escape, no one has ever complained that I've squeezed in a dozen pots and planters over the years. A tiny drop of paradise in this urban wasteland.

My tabby cat, Pandora, yowls as she crawls out of one of the planters, hissing as she spots Libby. She sidles up to me and winds around my legs as I stroke her grey fur.

"Hey, foul creature," Libby hisses back.

"Don't call her that!"

"She hates me!"

"It's nothing personal. She hates everyone."

"Everyone but you and your dad."

I flick my soft brown curls over my shoulder, blinking at her with what I hope are innocent eyes. "Have you tried hating us? We are difficult to hate."

"I have tried," Libby admits, "and you are."

Libby and I first met at a self-defence summer school that dad sent me to when I was eleven. I was pretty hopeless. Libby was not. She and I were partnered together every time because we were a similar size, but I never, ever managed to beat her. I thought she hated me, but when she heard I wouldn't be taking the class when school restarted, she was disappointed.

"But… but you hate me!" I stammered.

She was baffled by this response. "Why would you think that?"

"You beat me every time!"

"You're *supposed* to beat your opponent, weirdo. That's the whole point."

Libby did not make friends easily, at least back then. Possibly because even as a kid she was kind of terrifying and was more likely to call you 'weirdo' than use your actual name. I may not have liked her at first, but I wasn't scared of her.

I invited her back to my house to play board games and evened the playing field. We've been friends ever since.

It's too cold to sit out on the roof for long, so we climb back into my room instead. It's a classic princess room; pastels and florals and lots of frills and lace that I probably should have grown out of but haven't. Aunt Imogen is always offering to come round and help me decorate it into something a bit more "mature" but having grown up with a father who's a classics professor with a minor obsession in fairytales, I don't see why a love of flowers has to mean I can't be a grown up.

Libby might disagree. She shakes her head at one of my stuffed toys as she flops down on the bed. I wonder what she's supposed to be dressed as. Then I noticed she's wound two locks of her shiny black hair into triangles on either side of her face, and has winged her eyeliner more than usual.

"Slutty cat?" I ask.

"*Sexy* cat," she responds. "And thank you."

"So… I take it you're not here to hang out?"

She rearranges herself on the bed, crossing her long, brown legs like some kind of model. "Whatever gives you that idea?"

"Lib—"

"Oh, come *on,* girl! It's just one night. One little party. Let your hair down. Wear it up."

"Could we not just stay home and watch a scary movie? Read each other horror stories?"

Libby groans. "Sephy. We are *seventeen.* I'm not saying we're done with scary movies. I'm not saying books are lame. All I'm saying is that occasionally, every so often, I would really, *really* like to see you just loosen up and act like a normal freaking teenager rather than an extra from a period drama."

"Rude." I pout, flopping down on the bed next to her and seizing one of the frilly cushions. "I wouldn't be an extra. I'd be the main character."

"Main characters do things. You never do things."

"Main characters in fairy tales never do things."

"You want to hang around here in your ivory tower waiting for some jerk with a crown to come and rescue you?"

I groan. "Ugh, no. Wait. How big's the crown? Is he cute? Does he have a room in his castle dedicated to arts and crafts?"

"Stop messing about. Come on, Princess. Let's get you out of this tower."

I sigh. “Why am I friends with you?”

“Because at this point it would be really weird to stop being friends. Also, you like me.”

Dad’s voice sounds up the stairs, and I flinch, as if I’m already doing something forbidden and he’s about to march into the room with a big, hurt, puppy-dog expression of total disappointment in me. “That you up there, Libby?”

“Yeah. Seph and I are just going to chill up here and watch some scary movies.”

“You girls want to order pizza?

Pizza actually sounds really good. Pizza sounds way better than sneaking out and potentially getting caught and hurting his feelings.

“No thanks, Professor C,” Libby replies in a heartbeat, “I brought a boatload of snacks with me.”

“Libby, you’ve known me almost half your life. You can call me Prof.”

“Yeah, no.”

“Pizza offer stands if you change your minds later.”

“Thanks, Dad!”

I just lied to my father. Or….or concealed the truth. Not a good feeling. I know how much he worries, how much he doesn’t like me being out. Last Halloween I went to a party at a friend’s house. Nothing crazy, parents were there too. I arrived home five minutes late and found Dad practically sobbing.

Well… I suppose he’ll be *less* worried if he doesn’t know I’m out. It’s a white lie, in that regard.

And dancing would be fun...

Libby can clearly see the conflict behind my eyes.

“Give it an hour,” she says. “One hour. If you’re not enjoying yourself, we’ll come back and do your thing. And I *promise* we’ll get you back by a suitable hour. Fair?”

“He’ll be so upset if he finds out.”

Libby’s eyes glint with mischief. “*If*.”

It’s not that I don’t want to go out, I do. I want to be adventurous. Or maybe I just want to want it, want to be brave and daring like Libby and not afraid of trouble and consequences and sad fathers and—

I wish adventures could be safer.

“Come *on,*” Libby moans. “There’s nothing in the city scarier than me.”

I raise an eyebrow. She might have the body of an acrobat and the strength of an athlete, but I can think of quite a few things scarier than her. Side effect of having an active imagination and a dad with a tendency to overreact and think the absolute *worst*.

But… she’s right, I suppose. She can certainly handle herself. What *is* the worst that can happen, if we stick together?

“Aaron will be there.”

Aaron is a mutual friend who’s possibly into me. He’s nice and sweet but I’m not really into him, or dating at all, really. I had a boyfriend once. Jack. He was all right, but it was more the idea of him I was attracted to. That, and the whole pressure to have a boyfriend and see what all the fuss was about. There was absolutely nothing wrong with him, but half the time we were together I was thinking more about coming home and curling up with Pandora and a good book. Maybe crocheting.

Maybe there was something wrong with me.

Maybe I *do* need to get out.

"Oh… fine!" I relent. "Just… don't make me dress up in something…" I gesture to her outfit.

"Sexy? Hot? Attractive?" She grins, leaping off the bed and making a beeline for my wardrobe. It's a fancy Victorian piece which dad bought at auction and I spruced up with a bit of white paint and floral stencils… like everything else in the room. "Don't worry. Your clothes all look like a Victorian governess tried to make costumes out of granny's curtains."

"Mildly offended."

"It's… unique," she offers, pulling out a warm cardigan with a big lace collar. "You have your own sense of style. I'll find something costumey in here, I'm sure…"

It's not actually that hard. She fishes out something I wore to a spring Renaissance faire I went to a year ago with Dad, and forces me into it, winding my light-brown hair into an elaborate braid and studding it with the dozens of the fake flowers loitering my dressing table.

"So… what am I supposed to be, exactly?"

"Rapunzel. Duh. Your hair is nearly long enough."

Another silly, childish thing, I guess. My hair still reaches the small of my back and I've no plans to cut it any time soon, even if Grandma constantly croons my curls would look great in a "sensible, chin-length bob." I personally think I'd look like a lion.

Libby brushes my hazel eyes with some weird mix of gold and lavender eyeshadow. She's way better with makeup than me. It's an odd combo, but it works. I feel like a butterfly.

As a finishing touch, she fishes out a necklace that looks like a piece of chipped glass but is actually resin holding berries in it. A gift from a relative, I think, or something I picked up at a flea market. It's the perfect adornment.

I look quite pretty. Maybe even *ethereal,* in the right light, when you can't see how cheap the fabric is or how loose the lace is on the cuffs.

Maybe this isn't a terrible idea.

Maybe I'm a bit vain.

Maybe that's OK.

Focus, Sephy. Chill.

Libby wants me to wear heels but I don't want to be traipsing and stumbling through the streets of London in anything wobbly, so we settle on a pair of boots which are much more sensible. I try to wrap myself in a coat but Libby says it completely ruins the look. I'm permitted a shawl.

It's going to get lost.

"There," she says, "perfect princess."

I have to admire how quickly she's put it all together. I might not look confident and sexy, but I do look nice.

Libby sets up my laptop with a scary film and turns the volume up to a level loud enough to convince my dad we're watching something, but not so loud he'll be barging in asking us to turn it down. It's quite clever.

"Carriage awaits," she says, swinging her leg out the window. "Come on!"

I wrap my shawl as tightly as it will go around my body, feeling sick with nerves. As we descend from the rooftop, a flash of something grey, like a silver shadow, darts in the corner of my eye.

I glance upwards, but I only see Pandora. She mewls protectively, and I try to smile. "I'll be back before you know it."

We catch the tube to Covent Garden and spill out onto the cobblestones streets. People are everywhere, the market alight with colours, lanterns and streamers, the air thick with smoke and the cloying stench of alcohol. The glass roof of the market swells with orange light, brimming out into the cold, dark air like a pumpkin.

We weave between the crowds, heading to whatever backstreet bar is unlikely to check ID and where the usual crew are waiting.

I try to be excited. I'll have fun, if there's dancing. But bars tend to be loud and sticky and crowded, and what I want is space and decent music and good company.

Not that my friends *aren't* good company. Just that there's nowhere to really speak in places like that and…

Well, most of my friends aren't into arts and crafts and children's classics and going to Renaissance faires with their dads. But they're cool that *I* enjoy those things, and having friends that don't mock you is a real plus when you're seventeen.

Aaron certainly doesn't mind that I like those things. He once even complimented me on a dress I'd made myself.

Maybe I should give him a shot.

We're just about to turn into one of the back streets when someone tugs at my elbow.

It's someone dressed up as some kind of goblin, only coming up to my waist. His mask is fantastic, like the thick green rubber is welded onto his skin. The nostrils of his long, hooked nose flare. A child, or an actor?

"This is the place for you tonight," he says, in a rough, gravelly voice. An adult, then, a hired performer judging by the quality of his costume. He flashes me a flyer. It's made of thick black paper. The silver writing shines with an iridescent quality, almost too beautiful to be real. *Annual Ball in honour of Samhain.* "Invite only. But you may bring a friend."

I turn to Libby, but she's texting the others to see where there are. When I look back, the goblin is gone. I turn the card; an address and a tiny map are printed on the other side.

"Hey Libs, check this out."

Libby slides her phone away. "Cool flyer."

"Want to check it out?"

Libby bats her eyes. "I'm sorry, what? Sephy Carter wants to go to a *club*?"

"It might not be a club. It says it's a party. The flyer is pretty."

"Picking where to go based on a pretty flyer. Now that tracks."

I also like that it uses the words 'ball' and 'Samhain.' It sounds like something fancy, from a fairytale. Less loud and sticky.

"Please?" I ask.

"The others are waiting…"

"We'll just stick our heads in, see what it's about—"

She sighs. "Fine, but only because I love you and I'm intrigued by Curious Sephy. She might

actually be fun."

"Oh, ha ha."

We walk briskly to the place marked on the map, an underground bar located on one of the smaller streets nearby. Above the door is a dense canopy of ivy and flowers. Fake, surely, but the black petals look crafted from patent leather, and I fight against the instinct to reach out and touch them. It's not hard to resist; the bouncers are almost seven feet tall and dressed up as ogres. They're wearing sharp black suits but their faces look like bluish rock. The masks fix seamlessly to their necks, and I keep staring, looking for the place where flesh meets latex, or a spot the make-up artist has missed. I can't find anything. The work is flawless.

One of the ogres catches me staring. He grunts, and his voice is like gravel.

I turn my attention to the people making their way through the doors. Men with painted faces, women in ball gowns, people in robes, a few small, willowy ladies with shimmering skin and long wings that trail along the ground like capes. I swear they even twitch.

And not a slutty cat in sight.

Libby reads the board outside. "What's Sam-Hain?" she asks.

"Sow-wen," I tell her. "Pagan word. Halloween, basically."

She rolls her eyes. "Could you read some normal teenager books sometime, please?"

"I've read Harry Potter."

"Harry Potter is a modern classic. It doesn't count. Also not for teenagers."

"I read a lot of smutty modern teen faerie romances, too."

Libby grins at this, because she also likes a bit of smut, and winks at me.

The ogres bar our passage at the door. "Invitations," they bark.

How are they making their voices sound like that?

I flash my flyer. One of the ogres raises an eyebrow, but says nothing. They part and let us descend under the arch down a long flight of dark stairs. Faint music drifts from below, it's pulsing, but not with the loud, angry energy of most clubs. It's melodic, icy. Mesmerising.

Libby frowns. "Invitation?"

"That's what the goblin said."

"The goblin?"

"The guy handing out the flyers."

"Why did he call it an *invitation?"*

"I don't know. Part of the whole charade, I guess? It's supposed to be a *ball,* after all."

We reach the final step, and a gasp falls from our lips. An entire new world opens up ahead of us.

We are in a monstrously large ballroom. I've never seen a room so large before. A huge, domed ceiling is painted with stars and drips with arches of ivy and black roses. Colossal buffet tables line the walls, spread with the most delectable dishes I have ever seen. Stuffed birds glistening with berries, greens smothered in butter, crisp vegetables cut into fancy shapes, delicate pastries, caramelised fruit with silver sauces, candied flowers, tiny cheeses with thick, dense rinds. The plates are shimmering gold. Fountains of wine are dotted around the room, and served in glimmering goblets.

At the end of the room is a dais, where a woman in gold is seated atop a throne of woven vines. She is hideously, impossibly beautiful.

But so is everyone else.

Every guest is a piece of artwork. Horns dripped in pearl beads, glittering painted faces,

swirling masks, rustling silk gowns, layers of chiffon and gossamer and taffeta.

I don't know where to look first.

"Wow," says Libby beside me, utterly still. "This is the only time in our lives you've been more appropriately dressed than me. Savour it, Sephy. Savour it."

I intend to, but the words never quite reach my lips. I can't utter a single word. I am overwhelmed and transfixed. I want to stare at everything at once.

This is a mistake, I think. *It has to be. It's a private party. No way this is free. Maybe they needed a few more people to make up the numbers or—*

Libby does not appear to think about how little sense this makes.

"This place is *awesome.* I'm gonna text the others and tell them to meet us here—do you think that invitation will stretch to five? Damn, there's no signal here. Hand me the invitation. I'll head back up and see if I can reach them. Don't go anywhere!"

I drift away from the entrance and stand beside the buffet table, eyeing the cupcakes. I'm a bit nervous about taking anything, still waiting for someone to figure out the error and kick us out. But the cupcakes look so cute, topped with tiny berries and butterflies.

"I wouldn't," says a voice nearby.

The woman in front of me is dazzling. She barely looks human. She's dressed as some kind of elf—pointed ears topped with metalwork so fine it looks like lace. A bow is strung across her back, but her clothes don't match the warrior vibe; she's dressed from head to toe in silver, threads of it running through her dark brown hair.

"It isn't for mortals," she says stonily, and glides away from me.

Wow, that's some dedication to character.

I don't take the cupcake. I figure I'll wait until Libby gets back.

Also, something in her ice-cold glare unnerved me.

I turn to the dancers, bending like reeds in water, utterly in sync. Their skin is brown silk, marbled white, sea-blue and green. I want to join them, but I know I'll look like an absolute idiot next to them. Better to wait until other, less skilled people have joined the dance floor. There's a poorly-dressed man in rags who looks as if he's itching to join them.

"Someone looks a little lost," says a voice from behind me.

I startle, the voice rippling through me, some strange intermingling of velvet and ice, a hard, dark purr.

I turn towards it.

A young man, barely older than me, is leaning against the buffet table, goblet in hand, as tall and lean as a willow. He's dressed as some kind of faerie prince. A crown of thorns and feathers sits atop his perfect, jet-black locks, and his cheekbones are so sharp they must have been painted on with gold and silver. His soft, dusted lips are pulled into a smirk.

His ensemble is so dark it's almost black, and gleams like an oil slick. Feathers and intricate gold embroidery line every cuff. The detail is insane. I want to ask where he got it from, but my throat goes dry at the sight of his face, and I start to wonder if maybe I've become drunk by proximity. The smile he gives me is liquifying.

He saunters towards me, his walk like water.

"How did you get in, young mortal?"

"I… I was invited…" I mutter numbly, wishing I could do better. "I had an invitation…"

"Oh?" He stops less than a foot in front of me, tilting his head. He's far too close. "And where is it now?"

"My… my friend has it."

"You should find your friend and leave," he says, his voice harder. "This is no place for the likes of you."

Just as I thought. A private party. Still, he didn't have to be so rude about it.

"What… what's this for?" I ask, stepping back. "Like… who are you people? A theatre troupe, or something? *Really* dedicated cosplayers? Super wealthy ones?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Is that what it looks like?"

"I really don't know what it looks like."

He squares up to me again, desperately close. His eyes are bizarre, gold and honey, rimmed with black and silver. Contacts, of course. Part of the costume.

I back into the table.

"Leave this place," he says, and I swear his eyes *flicker*. "Don't come back. Forget you were here."

I don't know where I find my courage from, but I pull away from him. "Sorry, *forget I was here?* What is that nonsense about? Have you *seen* this place?"

Something else stirs in his gaze now, but not whatever it was before. Something like panic. "You're… you're not leaving."

"I mean, it would be nice if *you* would, but no, I'm not." In fact, I'm suddenly determined to stay the whole night, dancing until my feet blister and eating whatever I damn well fancy.

Well, maybe until eleven.

His eyes glance towards my chest. "Nice necklace."

"Um—"

"Would you like a drink?"

"I don't drink," I tell him. *I'm too young and I do not accept drinks from strange men*. "Are you flirting with me? Because a minute ago you were telling me to leave. Less than a minute, actually —"

He downs his entire goblet, flinging it away like a paper towel, and marches towards me. Before I even fully understand what's happening, he grabs my arms and shoves his mouth against mine. The wine is everywhere in his kiss, sliding against my tongue. His own shoves into my mouth.

I push him away from me, wiping the kiss from my mouth. I cough on the wine, half swallowing.

"Sorry love," he says, his smile feline, "couldn't resist."

I strike him across the cheek, my palm singing. It's like punching marble.

"Go to hell," I snarl.

A smile twitches in the corner of his red cheek, but something dark simmers behind those golden eyes, a flash of something less than amusement and far, far more dangerous. "Unfortunately, I'm obliged to stay a little longer."

"Who the hell do you think you are, coming up and kissing a random stranger?"

I've read about men like him, seen their ilk in films and series. The sort of drunk idiot who feels they can get away with anything when inebriated, the sort that everyone else laughs off the crimes for, as if drinking was a valid excuse for vile behaviour.

"What's the matter with you?" I barrel on. "A slap is the least you deserve! How dare you kiss me. How dare you kiss *anyone*. You're despicable, you're—"

"Leaving," he interrupts, holding up his hands. "Like you wanted. You can yell at thin air, if you like, but I suggest you do that elsewhere. Have a nice evening. Don't say I didn't warn you."

He strolls back into the crowd.

I swallow, the taste of wine still lingering on my tongue. I'm not a big fan of wine; it's cloying and sour. But this is as sweet and fragrant as pomegranates.

The only nice thing about that whole exchange.

Libby materialises at my shoulder. "Did that guy just kiss you? I was going to offer to beat him up but you looked like you had everything under control. You OK?"

"I'm fine," I say, shaking my head. "Come on, let's dance."

I drag Libby onto the dance floor.

"Did you get through to the others?"

"Jackson isn't picking up his phone *or* answering his texts. Left a message on the group chat with a photo of the map. Wasn't going to wait for them and leave you down here alone, just in case, well… you know."

I get accosted by some creep?

"Sure."

I try to fling myself into the music, putting that strange guy with the golden eyes out of my mind, but it isn't easy. I can still feel his kiss against my lips. Not in a pleasant, lingering way, but in the way you might feel a punch—like a bruise against my flesh.

What possessed him to do that?

"Drink?" a winged waitress offers us.

Ah, yes. Drink possessed him to do that.

"Er, yes thanks!" says Libby, snatching up the tiny glass of gold, bubbling liquid. "Seph?"

"I'm OK."

Libby rolls her eyes, as if I'm the one being silly and foolish, and necks back what is probably very expensive champagne. The waitress sashays away, her wings flickering.

How is she doing that?

I look for the wires or whatever's animating them, but they join with her flesh perfectly. They must be glued on. And the sheen… fibre optics? Coming up from the back of her dress?

Other dancers surround us, beautiful women with painted skin, blue and green and pink. They push other people into our circle, others like us who don't quite belong. At least two homeless people, an intoxicated middle-aged man in a silk shirt, and a group of students.

Libby giggles beside me. "Seph, this drink is *so* good! You have to try it!"

But I don't want to. There's something… odd about all this, a creeping feeling on the back of my neck. I don't feel lucky anymore that we were selected for this party. I feel…

Afraid.

Waitresses whirl around us, plying us with more drinks, trying to force me to sip. The colours of the room blur, and I'm sure, for a second, that they're flying.

My eyes catch the strange boy from earlier. He's in a corner behind the dais at the far end of the room, talking to an olive-skinned woman with some urgency. They both look up at me.

I turn away, heart pounding. "Libby, I think we should go."

"Go?" She doesn't stop spinning. "But we're having so much fun."

"Lib—" I catch her by the arms. Her pupils are blown wide. Has someone slipped something into her drink?

There's the sound of trumpets. The rest of the music dies, and the dancers close around us.

Doors fly open. A group of creatures pool in, goblins and trolls, other things with misshapen faces, long, grey limbs, furry arms.

No, no. People *dressed* as creatures. Because the alternative… doesn't make any sense. The room can't actually be filled with goblins and ghouls.

And that pixie woman did *not* just fly.

They're all just exquisitely detailed costumes.

Right?

That dark feeling rises up again.

The horde at the door parts to reveal a monstrously tall man with what appear to be antlers growing out of his head. And his feet… his feet are cloven hooves.

"Whoa," says Libby beside me, "excellent special effects."

A hush falls over the crowd as he strides towards the dais at the other end of the room. I fixate on his legs as he walks past, trying to work out where his feet are. Maybe they're prosthetics?

It looks so real for something that absolutely cannot be real.

He bows to the woman seated on the throne. A golden crown of leaves and roses is woven through her hair of pure spun gold. Her dress is a carpet of petals, a train flowing down the steps.

"My Queen," says the horned man, kneeling before her.

She rises to greet him, and the hush falls louder still. "Greetings this fine Samhain, our brother of the Unseelie Court."

He keeps his head bowed.

"Arise, King Valerian, and examine your tribute."

His goblins close in around us, several of them brandishing spears. One of the girls lets out a squeak, but the rest just laugh. They're drunk. They think it's a game.

And it must be a game, right?

Right?

Libby clutches my elbow. "This is mad, right? I love it. So glad we got in."

I'm not. I'm not, and I don't think you should be either.

The queen sweeps off her dais. The crowd bows, shrinking back. She comes to inspect each of us in turn, and I have the strangest notion of what it must be like to be an insect.

She stops in front of me, and a long, serpentine smile slides across her cheeks. She lifts an elegant finger and tilts up my chin. I'm quite tall, for a girl. I'm not used to looking up at women. But this lady… she makes me feel like I'm tiny.

"This one," she says.

A guest—I don't who—lets out a gasp. Something frightened, almost guttural. A few others look unnerved, as if there's something wrong with her choice.

But it's a game, a game. Only a game.

Two goblins prod me with sticks, inching me to the centre of the room. The mosaic on the floor glows, and a broad-shouldered man stands there with a very long sword.

He smiles at me, but it's the same smile the queen wore, devoid of any warmth.

"Um, I'm not sure I want to play any more," I whisper.

A few people laugh, but many others look away.

Libby moves forward, sobering up. "Hey, look, she's not enjoying herself—" The goblins tighten in around her. "Look, I will hurt you. Move out the way."

They don't.

"Libby," I continue, my voice shaking slightly, "Libby, I'd like to go home now—"

"You heard her," Libby says, pushing against the spears. "Let her—"

I'm dragged into the centre.

"Sephy!" Libby calls. She kicks one of the goblins in the shin, yanking his spear out of his grasp and sweeping up several others in one fluid motion, but two of the doormen grab her arms and pin her back. "Let go! Let go of me and let go of *her.*"

She keeps struggling, but even she is no match for the strength and number of them. Her eyes are wide, and I think she understands just as I do that something is very, very wrong with all of this.

Have we been drugged and wandered into some kind of elaborate cult?

Or… or am I actually seeing what I think I'm seeing?

"Courts of Seelie, we gather here on Samhain to offer tribute to our Unseelie Court, to offer them a gift in return for another year of peace," the queen croons. "King Valerian, do you accept our sacrifice?"

Sacrifice. The word pounds against my chest like a drum.

"I accept," he says, his voice solemn.

"Excellent. Lord Ares, if you will?"

Somewhere in me, the daughter of the classics professor rises up. *Ares? Like the Greek God of War?*

I'd think about it more—the strangeness of the crossover, of faeries merged with Greek mythology—but my mind is snagged by the queen's words.

Sacrifice.

I'm yanked before the broad-shouldered man with the sword, and I think I struggle, but I can't be sure. I think I might even scream, or cry out. I think Libby does too.

"Please," I whisper, "I'm late home. My father will be missing me—"

Another laugh, louder than before.

Are they going to kill me?

"Enough," says a dark, cold voice. "I'm afraid I have a prior claim on this sacrifice."

The kiss-stealing boy from earlier parts the crowd, and nervous eyes dart about the room, as if this *prior claim* is worse than the man with the huge sword.

"Oh honey, *no,*" says a heavily-made-up person at one of the tables, male or female, I can't really tell. "Death would be kinder on the poor thing."

I try not to tremble. What on earth is going on?

"Lord Hades," says the queen icily, "what possible prior claim could you have?"

Hades. The Ares thing clearly wasn't a coincidence.

"She drank my wine," he says, a smirk simmering in his cheeks. "Any mortal that drinks my wine is mine by right, for a period of seven months. You know this."

"But I never—" I stop. The kiss. The taste of pomegranates. "That doesn't count!" I splutter instead. "You forced me to—"

"A rule is a rule," he says.

"A rule is a rule," the queen concedes, her jaw tense. "But we already have her picked out—"

"I daresay Lord Valerian can be tempted by another…" He strides forward, and for one, horrible moment, I think he intends to grab Libby, but he hauls out the man in a silk shirt instead and throws him at the feet of the one they called Ares. The man trembles, but his eyes are glazed and unfocused.

"Blood is blood," says Hades. "Will this satisfy, King Valerian?"

"It will satisfy."

"Good."

He pulls the sword from Ares' sheath. It's a great gold blade, thick as an axe, polished to the

point of a mirror. The man quivers, catching his reflection.

"Please," he says. "I have—"

Hades does not pause, does not speak, does not say anything. He pulls the weapon back and runs the man through with a single strike. There is a sickening gurgle as he yanks back the blade. The blood fills the space, and I sink to the floor.

That was not staged.

That man is dead.

I've just watched someone die.

Coldness grips me, and my body no longer feels like my own. I don't understand what I've just seen. I'm trapped in some kind of nightmare, as dark and thick as the blood on the marble floor.

Hades hands the sword back to Ares, laughing. The older man does not look happy.

"Cheer up, brother," he says, "there's plenty more people in the world to murder."

"Lord Hades," says the queen, her voice hard, "this is most irregular."

"Keeps things interesting though, doesn't it, My Queen? You have your sacrifice, peace may continue, and I have a little souvenir to take home." He pulls at my elbow. "Come on, mortal. Let's get out of here."

"Umm, Lord Hades?" the effeminate person next to the buffet table speaks up. "Could you like, please not ruin this one? The shrieks the last mortal made…" They shudder. "Like, I know she's only human, but… gross."

I can't move, but when he hauls me to my feet, I find the strength to struggle. Libby does too.

"Sephy! *Sephy!* Let go of her or I swear to God I'll—"

Hades clicks his fingers, and someone points a knife to Libby's throat. He leans down and hisses in my ear. "If you don't come quietly, she will die. Come with me and you both get to live."

I stop struggling. My mind is dribbling away from me. Sensation of all kind is dribbling away. The air is thick with the coppery smell of blood, the world has turned upside down.

And so I join it, sinking into deep oblivion.

I don't know how long I'm out for, but I wake in the dark under silk sheets. Everything in the room is covered by a veneer of blackness, thicker than night. I can make out only the faint edges of the bed, the furniture… and a person in a chair next to me.

I shriek, tumbling from the mattress, pulling the sheets with me. I'm still in my clothes. My boots have been removed, and my shawl is gone. But everything else is where it should be. If he was planning on doing something else to me, he's not done it yet.

A thousand dark thoughts tear through me. I want to scream, but my throat has closed up. I find my voice just as a wave of nausea churns inside.

"I'm going to be sick," I choke out.

"There's a bathroom just—"

I grapple in the dark for anything, and my fingers fix on a cool, round object beside the bed. I hurl up the contents of my stomach into it.

"Or that priceless Ming dynasty vase, sure."

My fingers shake on the ceramic lip, a cold icing my veins. I wait to see what my body plans to do next, but it does nothing.

Something is pressed to my mouth.

"Drink."

I know I shouldn't, but I'm thirsty and frightened and honestly, what does it matter any more?

I gulp it down. It's not wine. It's something warm and tingling and sweet, like hot chocolate and melted silver.

My breathing slows.

"Forgive me," says my captor, stepping away from me, "it turns out there are few ways to watch a stranger sleep that aren't intensely creepy. It was not my wish to frighten you."

If you don't want to frighten people, you probably shouldn't kidnap them! But I don't find the strength for that. Instead, the rather pathetic, "Who… who are you?" dribbles out instead.

"Didn't you hear?" He holds out his arms, crossing his legs and sinking back into his seat. "I'm Hades."

I swallow, my heart thumping wildly. He can't be *that* Hades, surely? "*What* are you?"

A ludicrous statement. One I never thought I'd have to ask anyone. But after what I'd seen tonight, I don't know what to believe, what anyone really is.

Hades pauses. "How familiar are you with Ancient Greece?"

"My father's a professor of classics."

He's quiet for a moment, staring at me, I think, but in this darkness it's hard to be sure.

"I'm pretty familiar," I add.

"Then you should already have an idea of what I am."

"You're… you're a *god?*" The very word seems ridiculous.

He snorts. "I'm not sure if there were ever gods who walked this earth," he says. "No. I'm one of the fae. A faerie, to be precise. All those legends about Zeus and the rest of the Olympic crew?

True, to an extent. But they weren't gods, just extremely powerful immortal faeries."

"Faeries."

"Yes, that's right."

"The dark twisted kind, right? Not the little ones with wings?"

"Many of my kind have wings, but yes, not like the ones in your little bedtime stories."

My breath hitches. "More like the ones that glamour you and steal your children?"

"That's more like it, yes."

"But you're… you're still Hades? From the legends? Ruler of the Underworld?"

"Well, not *that* Hades, but yes. Prince of Darkness, Lord of Night, all of that."

"But not *that* Hades?"

"It's a title. Passed on."

"Right." I hug the blankets closer. "Why… why am I here?"

"You were about to be used as a sacrifice. Would you have preferred I let them kill you?"

"But what… what do you want with me? One of the partygoers suggested—"

He gets up from his seat, his lithe body tense. "Let me make a few things clear: I have no intention of bedding you against your will. I have no intention of harming you in any way. If you like, you can shut yourself up in this room for the next seven months and I won't bother you at all."

Seven months.

"I… I can't stay here," I mutter, aware of how stupid and insipid I sound. "If you don't want me, you can just take me back… *please*. My father, and my school—I'm supposed to be applying for university, doing my exams, I can't just—"

Priorities, Sephy.

I expect him to laugh, but he doesn't. I can't see his face well enough to know what he's thinking. "I can conjure you the perfect results. I can glamour any university into accepting you. So don't worry about that. But I can't take you back to the mortal world."

"But… but why not?"

I sound like a petulant child. I wish I could be stronger, braver. I wish I was more like Libby and could fight my way out.

Libby. Oh God—

"I stole a tribute that was meant for the Unseelie King. The sacrifice is an important annual event for maintaining peace between the two courts. What I did was a gross violation, but my prior claim protected me… and you. Taking you back would be a forfeit. I'm not entirely sure what our dear queen Zera would do to me… but I have a fairly good idea of what she'd do to you. And anyone who tried to shield you."

Dad.

"My father," I rush, "is he—"

"He'll be in no danger, as long as you stay away. Once the months are up, I don't *think* she'll bother either of you."

I don't like the sound of that, but what can I do? I'm trapped here, and even at home I wouldn't have the power to protect him. "And my friend Libby—"

"Probably glamoured into forgetting everything she's seen and sent back out onto the streets. One sacrifice, one year. She won't be in danger."

This is too much. Questions whir, half-formed, in every crevice of my mind. I can barely tug one free, the others crowding round it.

"If you… if you don't want to…" My voice falters on the word. *Bedding* seems far too polite

for what I was sure he was going to do. "If you didn't want to do… *that* with me… why take me at all?"

I stop myself from using the word *saved*. I do not feel saved. I feel trapped.

I hear the rustle of his clothes as he turns away, and a coldness brushes his next words. "I didn't fancy a girl like you being killed."

"You killed that other guy."

He pauses, his words tightening further. "I know many a mortal doctrine states that all life is sacred, that you cannot weigh up the price of a soul or what have you, but you are young, and I assumed you had a family, one that would miss you immeasurably if something were to happen to you. That man… he did not."

"How could you know that?"

"He bragged to me about beating his wife. I'm fairly sure she's better off without him."

"People… people say all sorts of things when they're drunk—"

"I glamoured him into telling the truth, so I doubt it."

I swallow at the coldness in his eyes, but something niggles at the back of my mind. Why was he interrogating him in the first place, as if he'd be the one to choose the sacrifice?

"Why would you even be talking to him?"

"I had my reasons."

I look down, stunned by the sharpness in his eyes. "Even if… even if he did all that… it still wasn't all right to kill him."

"No, but it was the lesser of two evils."

"Spare me your noble philosophy," I spit. "I heard about the things you've done to… to…" *To mortals like me.*

"Indeed," he says. "By all accounts, I'm quite the monster."

I swallow. "Please," I say. "My father. He'll be so worried—"

"Don't worry about your father," he says, shifting upright. "I'll see he's not left worrying." He turns towards the door. He is so silent, that for a moment, I think he's slipped out already. Only the tiny creak of the door tells me I'm wrong. "What's your name?" he asks. "The other girl called you 'Sephy'. Is that it?"

It's only when he asks that the ridiculousness sets in. I feel almost nervous. It's just too ironic.

"Don't laugh."

"I doubt I will."

"It's Persephone," I tell him. "But pretty much everyone calls me Sephy or Seph. You… you can too, I suppose."

"Sephy is a strange name."

At this, I can't help but snort.

"What?" He frowned. "What is it?"

"Only a freaking *faerie* would find 'Sephy' stranger than *Persephone."*

"If you say so."

"And… and you? What should I call you?" *If anything.* "You said 'Hades' was a title—"

"Hades will do," he says stiffly. He sighs. "You may not feel it, but you *are* safe here, Persephone. Explore whatever you wish. There's food on the table when you want it, or a kitchen opposite if you desire something else. You may go wherever you like, but I advise not leaving the palace. The Underworld… is no place for a mortal."

Is any of this the place for me? I have never been more certain I didn't belong.

He waits for a moment at the door, for another question, or a thank you, I don't know. Eventually, he gives up and slips away. I find myself alone in the dark once more.

Safe. Here. In the literal Underworld.

With a murderer.

Where no one can hear me scream.

When I find the strength to stand, I try to explore the rest of the building, but it's so dark and gloomy I only get as far as the kitchen and dining room before giving up. I can't find any light switches, and I can't find any torches or candlesticks either. A thin light emanates from crystals embedded into sconces on the walls, but it's not nearly enough to see by. My phone is dead and isn't of any help.

I am in the literal underworld. A part of me keeps expecting to wake up, or find it's all some part of an elaborate hoax, but of course I don't.

Because it isn't.

Because magic is real.

The questions start forming again, but they're still swimming in a pool of fear and confusion, and I can't quite fish them out. I find the table with the food on it, and manage a few mouthfuls. Nothing more. I feel sick to my stomach.

The darkness crawls under my skin. I've always hated the dark. Not *feared* it, just hated it. This time of year when the nights grow long always affects me, stealing my energy and making me thoroughly miserable until I feel the earth shifting towards sunlight again.

When Dad heard about this, we started celebrating the Winter Solstice, flooding the house with lights, drinking non-alcoholic punch, having a fancy meal and lighting sparklers on the roof. I spelled out *goodbye, night* and blew wishes into the dark.

Dad.

Whoever—*whatever*—this Hades guy is, I hope he is a man of his word, that Dad isn't pacing the floor going mad with worry, that he hasn't called the police.

I hope he remembers to feed Pandora.

I hope Libby is safe.

Please be safe.

There's nothing to distract me. For hours, I sit in the dark, or move around the corners of my room, feeling it out. I discover a bathroom, fully plumbed. No idea how it works.

Magic. It works on magic. Because that is a thing now.

It was always a thing. The world is not what you think it is.

I find some paper on a desk and start folding it into origami flowers, the only creative task I can manage in the low light, although I'm not sure of their quality. Eventually, desperate for light of any kind, I tip-toe across to the kitchen and open up the fridge. It seems strange that the fearsome Lord Hades has something as normal as a fridge in his abode, but I suppose even all-powerful faeries need to eat. Still, the cartons of milk, slabs of cheese, jars of condiments and hunks of meat look completely out of place here.

What was I expecting? Eyeballs? Bat wings?

Regardless of the morsels on display, I haven't much of an appetite. I take out the milk and rummage around the cupboards, searching for tea. I find a jar of something that looks expensive and make up a brew with teacups that look like they're forged from flower petals. The silver spoons are

as delicate as air.

Without thinking, I pour myself two drinks, rarely having ever made myself just one before.

Dad. I'm making one for him, too.

Even drinking feels too much, after that.

I hear the sound of a door opening, and someone shuffling along to my room, knocking on the door. I freeze, wondering if I can somehow use this to my advantage. If he goes in to check on me, maybe I can sneak away…

To where, Sephy?

Anywhere that isn't here, although I doubt the Underworld is going to be easy to traverse. Libby would still try.

Libby would probably be very brave and very dead.

Is it smart to stay put and play along?

What else can I do?

"In here," I say quietly, half-hoping he won't hear me.

The door opens. I see him more clearly in the light of the fridge. He looks dishevelled, black hair in disarray, clothes less than pristine, no fancy make-up.

"Are you hungry?" he asks.

"Not particularly, no."

"Then why are you standing by the fridge?"

"Uh, because it's really dark in here and I wanted to see?"

Hades blinks at me. "You… you can't see in here?"

"Obviously not. Wait, can you?"

"You're mortal," he says, as if this is a surprise to him. "You can't see in the dark."

"Clearly!"

He clicks his fingers, and the light in the room begins to rise, eeking out a rather stylish, slightly Victorian kitchen.

"Better?"

"Yes."

He folds his arms. "You've been sitting in the dark all day."

"Couldn't exactly do anything else."

"You should have just asked—"

"You weren't here." *And I'm not sure I would have asked you anyway.*

"Ask the building if I'm not around."

"Ask… the building?"

He nods, and raises an eyebrow, gesturing for me to try it.

"Um, I, er… can I have more light, please?"

The crystals in the room burn to the point of lightning. It seems impossible that *I'm* making them do that, that this still isn't some trick.

"Um, back down again, please," I say, still testing it. "And… fade to pink? Now blue! Now—"

Hades brandishes his arm impatiently. "Test it later. I've got some things for you."

"Some… things?"

He opens the door and waves me into the corridor. "I went to your home and glamoured your father. He thinks you've won a scholarship to a fancy school."

I cannot under any circumstance imagine Dad not messaging me every single day and worrying his socks off that I was OK, but I have no choice but to trust this glamour business works, that it

covers things like that, and that no one else will get suspicious.

"I sought out your friend from last night, too," he adds, as if reading my mind. "The glamour should cover anyone else that might notice you were gone. Any other friends, or a boyfriend—"

"No boyfriend," I tell him, although I have no reason to want him to know this. *Why am I sharing anything with him?*

I wonder how he got their addresses, what magic reveals people's locations.

"Right," he says, his expression unreadable, "I brought you back some stuff, too." He opens the door and points to a couple of bags. "I'd apologise for breaching your privacy, but—"

"You kidnapped me. We're beyond that. Sure."

He winces, but I ignore it. One of the bags shakes and mews.

"Pandora!" I race to unzip it. The cat springs out and into my arms, her mewling soon turning to purring. "You brought my *cat?*"

"I hope so. Was a bit worried I might have picked up a neighbour's by mistake. Or a shape-shifting viper."

"My *cat*. My father could have looked after her, you know."

"I thought you might like the company."

It's weird, almost thoughtful. Not the sort of thing most kidnappers would do. Not unless—

"Is this some weird thing you do? You kidnap random mortal girls and then try to impress them with looking like you actually care? A whole Stockholmy, Beauty-and-the-Beast type thing? What do you do? Wait until they fall in love with you and then—"

"What? No, no, not at all. I swear it." He looks at me like this should be the end of the conversation.

"Like I should believe that."

He appears confused. "I can't lie."

"What?"

"Faeries. Quite the classic trait, I believe. We cannot speak an untruth."

I narrow my eyes. "How do I know you're not lying about that?"

"I… hmm. I suppose that's fair. You'll have to decide that for yourself. Or try and catch me in a lie." There's a glint in his eyes as he suggests this.

All right. I'll bite. "Favourite colour?"

"Black."

Of course. "Favourite food?"

"Roasted venison with pomegranate."

"Favourite season?"

The briefest of pauses. "Spring."

That surprises me. It's hard to imagine this black-clad boy skipping in the sunlight, smelling the daisies. If he's trying to convince me he can't lie, he should have chosen something more believable. "Favourite book?"

"Nothing you would expect," he says, with the flash of a smile.

"Middle name?"

"I am not going to tell you."

"Best friend from childhood, then?"

At this, he hesitates, his mouth frozen.

"That wasn't meant to be a stumper."

"I guess not." He runs a hand through his hair, and a strand snags on a cut. His hands are

shredded with fine scratches.

I slide Pandora to the bed and take an involuntary step towards him. "Jesus, what happened to your hands?"

He stares at me, as if the answer should be obvious. "Your cat. Your cat happened to my hands. Your cat is *feral."*

"Wow, those look really bad. Have you got some antiseptic cream—"

I stop, because I realise it sounds like I'm offering to help him, like I'm concerned. *Sephy, what is the matter with you? Don't offer to bandage your kidnapper's hands!*

"I am the all-powerful Lord of Night. I do not need *cream."*

"The all-powerful Lord of Night who got bested by a *cat."*

"I did not get bested by a cat. I managed to secure the beast in a container. I won that battle, feline."

Pandora takes a swipe at him, and he backs up several paces.

I can't help it. I laugh. For a second, I don't care that he's supposed to be an all-powerful murdering crazy boy. I forget that he's kidnapped me. For one tiny moment, he's just an awkward teenager who's frightened by a cat.

And then I remember everything else.

"Thanks for the stuff," I tell him coolly, wishing I hadn't said *thanks*.

"You're welcome." His face is devoid of any expression, and he moves back towards the door. "I'm not here most of the day," he tells me, his back facing me. "So you may have free rein within these walls. The palace will attend to your needs if I'm not around."

"Wait—" I say, stopping him in his tracks.

He turns back, appearing almost hopeful. "Yes?"

"I er, can you um, summon a litter tray for Pandora? And maybe some cat food—"

"Ask the kitchen for food," he snips. "As for the other business…" He crosses the room, leveling with Pandora, and looks her straight in the eyes. He whispers something to her in a low, dark voice, and she whizzes off into the bathroom.

"She will be using the toilet from now on, like a civilised kitty."

"Did you just… glamour my cat?"

"Yes. Did I do something wrong?"

"No, I'm just wondering why you didn't do that before she scratched you to pieces."

"How do you think I got her in the box?" A smile, barely there, and then he disappears into the corridor.

I am alone once more.

Beneath a canopy of petals, I lie on my bed, my fingers tangled in Pandora's fur, and wonder what on earth is going on.

I realise that he tried to glamour me the night of the revel, tried to glamour me into leaving, but for whatever reason, it didn't work.

And then he tried to get me to drink the wine.

And when I wouldn't, he forced me to.

The kiss was not a kiss.

I don't understand. Why go to all that trouble to save me?

And why couldn't I be glamoured?

I want to ask him, but I don't want to seek him out. I want to know, but I don't want to ask.

He's still the person who took me here. Still the person that threatened to kill Libby. Who *did* kill that other person, without a moment's hesitation.

Even if he can't lie, he can't be trusted.

I inspect the bag of stuff he brought me from my room. For the most part, it looks like he just ransacked my bedside table. My crochet kit is there, a few of my stuffed animals, my sketchpad and pencils, a few hair bits, and the stack of books I always kept there. A few I'd yet to read, and a few I'd read so often that I'd committed passages to memory. *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, Alice's Adventures in Wonderland,* and *Peter Pan and Wendy.*

The last book was a beautiful illustrated edition, old and steeped in history, much better than the flimsy paperback copy I'd read to shreds years beforehand.

It was my favourite. It arrived the day of my thirteenth birthday, wrapped in beautiful leaf-print. There was no note, but the inscription read in a long, elegant hand, *Dear Persephone, sometimes, I wish you were the one who wouldn't grow up.*

It wasn't signed, but I'd been convinced at the time that the book had come from my mother. No one but Dad and Grandma ever said they wished I wouldn't grow up. It was such a parent thing to say. Who else could it possibly be from?

I didn't tell dad about it. I didn't tell him, because I didn't want to be wrong. I didn't want to learn that *he'd* sent it, and maybe got someone else to write in it, like a letter from Santa Claus, a suggestion that my mother had sent it without an outright lie.

Instead, I folded the only picture I had of her into the dust cover, and read it every time I missed her.

People say you can't miss what you never had, but I've missed my mother my entire life. I know so little about her, only that she and my father met when he was on a sabbatical in Crete. Her name was Daphne. I have her curls and her smile and she has a piece of me I can't name. They dated for a few months, and then he came back to London.

A year later, she turned up on his doorstep with me in tow. The next part of the story has been watered down and told to me in tiny snippets over the years, when I was old enough to know a little better, when Dad could find a stronger way of explaining why she couldn't keep me.

"She wanted you. She did, Sephy, but… she couldn't cope. She needed a bit of help."

Postnatal depression. It explains how she could hand over her baby and walk away, thinking Dad was better for me than she was.

It didn't explain how she could stay away. It didn't tell me if she ever looked back, or if she thought about me as often as I thought about her.

No one asks when you don't have a dad. It's dumb, it's sexist, but they get it. We're used to it as a society. Dads leave.

When you don't have a mum, people ask *why*. They look at you funny, like there must be something wrong with you, or assume she must be dead, because what kind of mother abandons her child?

It's hard sometimes not to let that get to you. Harder still to not ask that question yourself, without blaming her in your stead.

If there is nothing wrong with me, there must be something wrong with her.

Nothing in her photograph suggests anything like that. She looks ordinary. Warm. She has brown curls, dark eyes, olive skin. She looks like everyone else's mum.

I sometimes wonder if I have siblings, if she moved on. If they were good enough for her and I wasn't. I hate that I might never know. She never gave Dad her full name.

She may forever be a stranger to me.

I stare at her photo, and for the first time, feel a longing for the other person in the picture with her. For Dad.

The tears stream down my face, thick, hard, choking sobs.

I cry for a while. I'm overdue. I cry for home and Dad and Libby and everything I want and everything that doesn't make sense. I sob into Pandora's fur.

I can't believe he went back for my cat.

For some reason, that makes me cry harder. It was a thoughtful thing and I don't understand why he did it, and I wonder if I should have thanked him properly and I hate that he makes no sense.

When I'm done with crying, I slide into the bathroom and run myself a bath. Grandma always told me that when you're miserable, getting clean will always make you a little bit *less* miserable. She's right, to an extent. My fears abate, just for a while, until I climb out.

I towel myself down and wrap myself up in the silk dressing gown that's hanging on the back of the door. It's like wearing warm air and buttermilk. Pandora winds herself around my legs, and I cuddle her briefly before heading to the walk-in wardrobe.

It is packed with the most amazing collection of gowns that I have ever seen. Soft, dainty things that float and glitter, huge, sweeping ball gowns crusted with roses. Outfits that pool and shimmer. Outfits that sing of spring and summer and have no place in this dark, seasonless place.

Actually, my room isn't too gloomy now that the light has lifted. The furniture is quite dainty, and the walls are a warm pink, between blush and terracotta. The four-poster bed is carved with roses, and the curtains glitter.

I wonder how many women have used it before me, and how *they* felt.

I wonder where they are now.

I pick out a cream-coloured gown made of layers of floating gossamer and embroidered with flowers, reasoning that it's also harder to be miserable when you're wearing something so beautiful. It almost works, and with the gloom dispersed from the corridors, I select a pair of sequined slippers and begin exploring in earnest.

The layout of the 'palace' is simple; there is an entrance hall, a long corridor, and a throne

room at the end. Everything is carved from obsidian; glossy, black, gleaming. There is not an inch of colour in the space save for the reddish, purplish glow of the crystals, and sconces of bright blue flames in the throne room.

There are ten doors off the corridor, each evenly spaced, the rooms behind them infinitely larger than they should be. Next to the kitchen is a plush dining room, and next to that a bathroom with a tub more like a swimming pool. There's a library beside this room—dark and dismal and devoid of any interesting literature—and something like an observatory adjacent, with a ceiling that swirls with shimmering starlight.

On the other side of the corridor is my room, and a locked room I assume must be Hades'. It feels strange to know he had been on the other side of the wall, so close by, until I realise that these rooms do not seem to obey the natural laws of physics, too large for the space they took in the corridor. Maybe he hadn't heard me sobbing. Maybe we weren't so close by.

Beside Hades' chambers is an armoury stocked with an impressive collection of weapons, followed by a bare room furnished with nothing but a mirror and an uncomfortable-looking chaise, which leaves only one room.

I push open the doors, and my breath is snatched from me. I'm certain I've stepped into a mirage, but a cool breeze whips through the air, a fresh scent dancing at my nose, both familiar and utterly strange at the same time.

It's pine and lavender and mown grass. It's none and all of these things. It's earth after rain, the first smell of spring, it's summer storms and meadows of wildflowers.

It's magic. It's the scent of magic.

I'm in some huge underground garden or wood. It's been carved out of the mountain, lit by crystals, and filled with trees and grass and flowers.

The air is teeming with strange winged creatures, like pale, luminescent butterflies. They leave a trail behind them, like smears of paint. I reach out to touch them; a faint, shimmering dust is left on my fingertips, but it disappears a moment later.

I follow the butterflies deeper into the garden, marvelling at crystal flowers, glassy petals, streams of water that run like pure silver. It seems endless, one magnificent cavern or glade leading onto the next. I could be there for hours, I don't know. Time seems suspended. I half-feel like I'm floating myself.

It is wondrously, impossibly beautiful.

"Pretty, isn't it?" says a voice from behind.

I startle. Hades. Of course it is. He moves as soundlessly as a cat.

"How… how is it possible? Nothing should be able to grow underground—"

"It doesn't," he explains. "Well, there are a few things real here; a few faerie plants that grow beneath the crystals, but for the most part, everything here is an illusion." One of the butterflies rests on his palm, and he crushes it in his fist. I wince, but a second later, it's reformed from the dust and is flying away.

"For a people that cannot lie, you'll find we are rarely truthful." He is quiet for a moment, as though lost in thought. It takes his eyes a while to settle on me, and when they do, his mouth twists into a wry smile. "Interesting choice of clothes."

"What else was I supposed to wear?"

"I assumed you'd crave something more… mortal."

"There was nothing in the closet like that."

Hades smirks.

"What? What is it?"

"The wardrobes summon only what you desire. You, it seems, secretly desire to dress like… an Edwardian faerie?"

I blink at him, thinking of the other assortment of fanciful gowns packed into the space, and why the shoes were the perfect size. "Well," I say, "I suppose it's not a secret any more!"

Now it is his turn to blink. I cannot believe anything I say is at all that baffling. Besides, he must be used to the questions by now, as I'm not the first mortal he's taken down here.

"You said you took me to save me," I start, summoning my courage, "why didn't you trick the other people into drinking your wine?"

He cocks his head, staring for an awkward fraction of time. "Who's to say I didn't, or I wasn't working my way round to them as fast as I could?"

"Such a hero."

"No," he says. "I am no hero. Just a coward, hiding in the shadows."

I don't know what to say to this. "You tried to glamour me, didn't you?"

"It was a good first resort."

"Why didn't it work?"

He points to my crystal necklace. I've yet to take it off. "It has rowan berries in it. Acts as protection against enchantments. Do you know where you got it?"

"Flea market, probably." My heart sinks. It's where I got most of my jewellery, but when he spoke, I realised I had some half-baked theory in the back of my mind, that perhaps my mother was a faerie, and that I was ordinary in every single way apart from the fact I couldn't be glamoured, and maybe she'd given me up for that reason.

A childish fantasy. Nothing more.

"Quite the coincidence, you having that charm and being invited to the ball."

"I suppose."

He is silent for a moment.

"So, rowan berries ward off glamours, like in the stories," I say. "What about the other things. Salt? Iron?"

"Salt will dispel enchantment on a mortal, it's true. Lesser fae—goblins, hobs, pixies and whatnot—have an aversion to iron, but no high fae. Only celestial steel; an ancient and rare metal, will wound us deeply, or take a long while to heal."

"You heal fast, then?"

He nods. "But we can be injured as easily as any mortal."

"Can you die of old age?"

He shrugs. "Doubtful. We age *a lot* slower. Our children age slower than mortal ones, and then after we look about twenty-five, it slows down even further. I don't know how old we'd have to get to *look* old, let alone die from it. But someone usually kills us before we get that far along."

I ignore the darkness of his last remark. "So… how old are you?" He doesn't look like he's in his twenties. He looks like a teenager… admittedly one that's been rendered in marble or photoshop.

He snorts. "I'm not answering that. It's considered rude to ask a faerie's age. It really doesn't matter, after a point."

"All right," I say, not remotely satisfied. "Can you get sick? Poisoned?"

"Are you trying to learn how to kill us? Because it sounds like you're trying to learn how to kill us."

I laugh despite myself. "No, I just… I'm *curious*. I've never met a faerie before. Aren't you

used to these questions by now?"

He shrugs. "I suppose I ought to be."

A strange turn of phrase. "So, really you can't lie?"

"Not outwardly, no."

"What does that mean?"

He sighs. "We can say naught but truth, but that doesn't mean we aren't deceitful. There are many ways we can be false, still. For example, you could ask, 'have you ever kept a secret from me?' and I do not have to answer yes or no—I could say, 'I have kept many secrets in my life, but desire to keep as few as possible between us.' It's not a lie. It sounds honest. But it isn't. Desiring not to keep secrets is not the same as not having them at all."

"I see, I think."

"We are masters of deceit, silver-tongued devils. It is probably safer to assume every word is a lie, save yes and no. Say you asked someone if they loved you. They could say they loved you like the sun… because no one really *loves* the sun. In fact, they take it for granted."

"That's actually… really interesting. So you couldn't ever say, '*I need you like I need oxygen to breathe'?*"

Hades rolls his eyes. "Does anyone still use that line?"

"I hope not."

The ghost of a laugh. "No, we couldn't say that," he confirms, "even if we wanted to. I suppose we could say we *felt* like we needed someone to live."

"Do… do faeries still love like mortals?"

He raises a black brow. "Be more specific? As quickly? As fleetingly?"

"As *deeply,*" I clarify. "Can you have that forever type of love, or is it… tempered, by the weight of eternity?"

Hades regards me carefully. "Few mate or marry for life, it's true," he says. "Eternity is so long, after all. But yes, we still love like you do, with a finality that feels like forever."

"Have… have you ever…"

"A very personal question."

"Sorry, just… forget I asked."

"All right," he says. "What about you?"

I shake my head. "I had a boyfriend once. But it wasn't serious. Nothing like that."

"I see."

"What… what other ways can you lie?"

"We can lie if we're telling a story. For example, I could tell you that the earth was flat, if it was part of a tale. There is no intention to deceive. I can say it when it is not the whole sentence, for example, *I once heard someone say the earth was flat.*"

It must be so strange, not to be able to lie, and yet be constantly finding ways round speaking the truth.

"And we can lie with a look," he continues. "You could make a statement, and I could look at you as if I disagreed, when I didn't. 'Tis only the words we cannot speak."

"I see."

"And beware of perhaps. Perhaps is an excellent word for liars to use."

It's an interesting masterclass in the art of lying, and despite myself, I find myself believing him. I really don't think they *can* lie.

"So… you really have no intention of doing anything um, untoward? With me, that is?"

Something twitches in his face, and I feel for a second, like I might have disappointed him. But if I have, he hides it well.

We can lie with a look.

"Not unless you ask me to." He smirks.

"Ugh." I roll my eyes. Perhaps this *is* what he does. Steals young women from their homes and charms them until they relent.

Although, that wouldn't explain the rumours.

"I'm going to the library," I announce. "Please don't follow me."

He stills. "As you wish."

I turn away from him, and do not look back.

The sluggish darkness of the palace is not easily abated. The utter sunlessness of the place crawls under my skin, like insects made of night. I itch for light, for day, and no amount of magic crystal can dispel it. I want to sleep until spring, but I can't.

I spend most of the next day in the library, searching for any snippets of sunlight folded between the pages of a book. I wouldn't exactly call myself a *great* reader, but I've always liked books. I read mostly for pleasure, but I also like reading for learning, which is just as well as the library is almost devoid of fiction. I find a book on medicinal plants, some magical, and one on knitting. I like trying my hand at new skills. Dad was a big fan of this. Every summer he signed me up for something new. Mostly, it became an exercise in 'things Sephy sucks at' but occasionally I'd find something I had an affinity for.

Self-defence, rock-climbing, horse-riding, canoeing? Not so much.

Crocheting, pottery-making, and anything arts and crafts? Not so bad.

There's no wifi to distract me, and I'm in desperate need of distraction, so I set myself a to-do list. One hour reading Peter Pan. One hour of crochet. Forty-five minutes for lunch. Half an hour making notes on botany. Another hour of *Pan.* Thirty minutes sketching.

I mean to practise my still life, but I end up drawing a silly chibi version of Hades instead, adding fangs and tiny bat wings. I don't know why. It's stupid and I almost screw it up, only it's not a bad drawing and probably a lot better than the wobbly vase I would have created with my mediocre still life skills.

I give up on my schedule, snatch one of the books I've not yet read that Hades stuffed into my bag, and sit down in the wingback chair beside the library fireplace to read it. I don't get far. I wander towards the imitation window instead and start to hum. I miss daylight. I miss the stupid cooing pigeons on my roof, and traffic, and *sound.* Things I hated are suddenly beautiful in their absence.

When I get home, I'm going to appreciate everything more, I promise myself. *Especially Dad. I may never leave the house again.*

"Has anyone ever told you, you can't sing?"

Hades appears from nowhere, as if he's slithered out of the shadow. This time, I manage not to startle. "No," I say firmly, "because most other people aren't as rude as you."

He's right, of course. My singing isn't great. But I didn't think I had an audience.

I turn towards him. He's dressed in black once again, in an outfit considerably less elaborate than the one he wore to the ball. No feathers, no gold embroidery. Something slick and scaled, half serpent, half dragon. It looks a little like armour. What does he need protection from?

Something growls behind him, and three furry heads rise out of the shadows. They look like German Shepherd puppies, only they're way, way too large.

And they only have four paws between them.

I scrub my eyes, thinking I must be imagining things. But of course, I'm not. "You have a three-headed dog."

He glares at me. "No, I don't. Why does everyone keep saying that?"

"Possibly… because you have a three-headed dog."

"No, I have three dogs with one body. Honestly! If you had conjoined twins you wouldn't say you had one child, would you?"

"I… I guess not. You're right." I look down at the hound, still struggling to see it as more than one. "So… are they Cerberus?"

"Don't be ridiculous," he says.

I breathe a sigh of relief.

"Cerberus are much bigger. No, these fine fellows are Kerby, Hurricane, and Fluffy."

"Fluffy?" I stifle a laugh. "Like… from Harry Potter?"

He raises an eyebrow, a careful, measured reaction. Not quite fast enough to emulate confusion. "It is possible I don't know what you mean."

Except, I suspect, he does. "You've read Harry Potter."

"A lot of people have read Harry Potter."

"A lot of *faeries,* though?"

"I didn't say I was among them." His eyes turn to the start of books beside me. "Botany? Medical textbooks?"

"I might as well stay educated while I'm here. Heaven knows I have the time, now."

"But… medicine?"

"I might want to be a doctor."

He frowns at me.

"Hey, don't give me that look! If I don't know what I can and I can't do yet, *you* shouldn't have the slightest clue!"

"You… want to be a doctor?"

I'm far more interested in botany than surgery, but I was at least a little intrigued. "I may want to be a doctor. Or make a skin suit. Limitless options once you know the craft!"

He stares at me, appalled. It makes me want to laugh, but I decide to be honest with him instead.

"I have no idea what I want to be, but I feel like I won't know unless I try everything. Hey, could you like, summon me a pig, or something? I could practise stitches on it—"

"I am *not* summoning you a pig."

"Why not? Their skin is the closest we have to human flesh—"

"It's messy and gross."

"You literally killed a man two days ago."

"Cleanly," he says, affronted. "Very cleanly."

It occurs to me that the other guy—Ares, was it?—might not have made it so clean. I think that guy was dead by the time he hit the floor.

Was Hades trying to spare him pain? Or am I just trying to comfort myself that I'm not living with a killer? Or at least, not a cold-blooded one.

The thought makes me shiver, even more so when I think of the armoury he keeps, the number of ways he must have of killing something *cleanly.*

"I'm going to take these to my room," I say abruptly, standing up and gathering the books in my arms. One of the dog heads growls at me as I walk past. Hades hushes him.

"Sure," he says, and holds open the door.

I hole myself up in my room for the remainder of the day, trying to read and not count the hours,

stroking Pandora when I fail on both accounts. Just before bed, there's a knock on my door. I do not rush to answer it.

By the time I get there, he's gone, but a small parcel remains. I tear it open.

It's a suture kit—the kind with fake flesh to practise on.

Who on Earth is this guy?

For over a week, I avoid him, sticking to my room and the underground garden, reading and knitting and practising stitches until the model skin has been pricked within an inch of its life and doilies and bad scarves coat every surface of my room.

I guess he can summon pretty much anything he likes using his powers. I doubt he went to much effort to get the kit.

Not like getting Pan for me.

I don't understand. Why do any of this for me?

'*By all accounts, I'm quite the monster.*'

A very strange, thoughtful kind of monster.

So where did the rumours come from?

Unless he can lie, and this is all part of some elaborate game to get me to like him. That seems like a more likely explanation.

I don't want it to be true, though.

By the end of the second week, I'm growing bored. My room is littered with abandoned art projects and paper flowers. I've never been this long without talking to someone before, and the quiet is starting to get to me. Hades is nowhere to be found, and I'm not sure what, if anything, I'd say to him anyway. He's gone most of the day, I've discovered. He leaves early and comes back late, spending almost no time anywhere but his room.

I wonder if he's trying to avoid me, or if he's just tired after he comes back from doing whatever it is he does out there.

What *does* he do out there?

I know he warned me about going outside, but he didn't expressly forbid it, and the way isn't locked. My fingers fall to the shiny black handles before I can help myself. The doors are impossibly tall and foreboding, carved with bones and raven's feathers.

But not locked.

Just a look, I tell myself. *Just one look. Just to see what it's like.*

I sigh at myself. Dad should have called *me* Pandora instead.

I swing open the doors and find myself in a colossal underground cavern, lit by the same crystals as the palace and an eerie, luminescent river packed with reeds. Everything else is dark and cold. The cavern is hollowed out like a chunk of honeycomb, dozens, hundreds of passageways leading to who knows where, some streaming with water. There is a strange sound echoing through the tunnels, half like a howl of wind, half like the wail of a human. It's a sound that trickles down my spine.

I inch forward, slowly. Carefully. I am not quite alone in this place. The walkways above are patrolled by someone.

No, not someone. Some*thing*. The guards are animated skeletons. And the water…

There are no reeds in it. Instead, the things drifting in the current carry the rough shape of

people, but as if someone was tearing them from paper. Only their faces look real.

Real, and horrified.

My stomach churns, a cold, sick chill crawling through me.

"Human," says a cool voice from behind me, "what are you doing in this place?"

I turn to face it, so startled I almost topple into the river myself. It is a tall, thin creature dressed in long grey robes, with a face like a rotting balloon stretched over a skull. It is almost entirely bone held together with only thin fragments of skin, and its empty eye sockets stare me into something like madness.

It tilts its head as I swallow my scream.

"Forgive me," it says, in a cool, raspy whisper, "I forgot to put my glamour on…"

It clicks its skeletal fingers, and a young man in a crisp suit appears in its place. He looks almost handsome, but something about his face is still taut, as if even the glamour is aware it's only a mask.

"Who… who are you?"

"I am the Ferryman," he says. "Who are you?"

"Persephone." I think about telling him I'm a guest of Hades, but am I? I suppose it fits better than, 'well-kept, free-range prisoner.'

The Ferryman regards me carefully with ice-blue eyes. I wonder if he's *the* Ferryman, Charon, from the ancient legends, or if that too is a title passed down through the ages. He doesn't seem like a faerie, and yet he was capable of utilising a glamour.

"Has the world been alive so long that time is moving backwards now instead of forwards?" he asks.

I frown. "What?"

"Persephone," he says. "I knew her."

"I… I'm not her."

"No," he says, sniffing the air around me, "you smell of mortal, and Persephone was a goddess."

"Hades… Hades told me there were no such things as gods."

"Hades has not been around for as long as I. Perhaps the Old Ones were not gods as you mortals might see them, but they might as well have been."

"And you?" I ask, hoping I'm not trembling. "What are you?"

"As old as they, but not one of the fae. Something else. Stone made flesh. The essence of the earth. Not fae. Not human."

"That must be lonely."

"Lonely," he says, as if he's never heard the word before, "I suppose it is. I would not know."

"You've never been lonely?"

"Earth cannot feel."

"Nothing? No… no emotion at all? No pain?"

"No emotion," he says slowly, "and no pain."

That does not sound like existing to me.

"What are you doing here, mortal child?"

"I was looking for Hades." A lie. But of course, he accepts this, so used to those who can speak only the truth.

"He's quite far in today," says the Ferryman. "But follow the centre path, and you might find him."

"What does he do out here all day?"

"Why don't you ask?"

Good point. A sudden thought strikes me. "What do you know of the other girls he's, er, entertained here?"

He regards me for a moment. "They were not like you."

"In what way?"

"Their eyes were empty."

I suppress a shudder. "Did he hurt them?"

"That's what they said."

"But do you think that's what he *did?*"

"What reason could he have for deceiving?"

I don't know, but I feel like there must be one.

"Why would he take them down here if he didn't want to hurt them? What else could he get from them?"

For a long time, the Ferryman is silent. "What does any human get from the company of another?"

"He isn't human."

"He is in the ways that matter," says the Ferryman. "Most of them are. They forget it when they live too long, but most of them are human at their core, or were once upon a time."

I don't know what to say to this, so I thank the Ferryman, and continue on the path he suggested, eyeing the river carefully. The skeleton guards pay no attention to me, as if they can sense how little of a threat I am. What do they guard against? The souls swirling in the water? They don't seem to be going anywhere.

I hardly know what I'm doing or why I'm doing it.

Perhaps I'm bored, perhaps I'm just glad to be outside the walls of the palace. Perhaps I'm thinking of Libby's comment about how I never do anything, and want to prove her wrong. Perhaps I want the danger, the proof I'm still alive and capable of fear even though the worst has already happened.

Or perhaps it's what the Ferryman says, about humans wanting the company of another.

Or the closest thing I have to it.

I don't know how long I wander for. I try to keep to a straight path, not wanting to lose my way back. I trail through caverns low and tall, large as mountains, small as cottages. Some hang thick with moss, others run dry and empty. Some are even akin to beautiful, although nothing like the pristine stillness of the gardens echoes here.

Eventually, the low wailing is replaced by something else, like a wet shriek, the sound a fish might make if it could talk. I ease through the dark passageways towards the sound, and find myself in a monstrous cavern. It's so bright that for a second I think I've found sunlight, but the light is coming from a massive, pulsating sphere above which vomits out thousands of slippery souls into a deep pool below. One of them has come loose from the stream and is flopping about the rocky shore, lashing out at the dark figure beside it.

Hades.

Three skeleton soldiers point their spears at it, but Hades holds up his hands, one towards them, the other towards the shrieking spirit.

"Have no fear," he tells it, "no one is here to hurt you. You are past pain, now, my friend. Do not be afraid."

Something in his voice seems to resonate, and the spirit stops lashing. It opens its mouth, and a quiet, sad sound flows from it. No words, but I seem to understand it nevertheless.

But where am I going?

I watch Hades stiffen, searching, I think, for something that isn't a lie. Or perhaps he can't understand it.

"Flow with the river," he says instead. "It will take you to where you need to be."

His words are so calming, so soft, that I'm half tempted to throw myself in the water and see where it takes me. The spirit reaches for him, but before it can clasp his hand, there is a strange, sucking sound, and it's dragged away from him, hoovered into the bottle of a lumpy-looking goblin standing on the shore behind.

Hades roars. The goblin freezes, realising its mistake. Hades' eyes flash red, lunging towards it. The skeleton warriors race to assist but are toppled by half a dozen of the stout, misshapen things that scurry out of the tunnels. One vaults over warriors' skulls and barrels towards Hades.

"Look out!" I cry.

Hades wheels around and grabs it by the throat. He lifts his other hand to its neck and *rips the body in two*.

There's an explosion of something black and green and gloopy. Blood, blood and flesh, everywhere. Over the stones, pooling into the stream, sliding down Hades' cheek.

In that moment, it is easy to see why they call him a monster.

Something flashes in the corner of my eye, a grey-skinned goblin with a yellow, crooked smile. "Human?" he hisses. "Tasty human."

It lunges towards me, but I dart backwards, trying to kick away the knife in its hand. It catches on my skirts, snagging the fabric. I try to move, but my feet jerk out from under me.

I plunge into the river.

Someone screams my name, but it's lost under the wailing. I'm submerged in the visceral green, faces howling into mine. I close my eyes, but I can feel them raking my skin, clawing at my eyes with their awful, disembodied voices. The sightlessness is almost worse.

And I can't breathe.

Something hard and tangible clamps around my limbs, and I'm yanked upwards. I still don't trust myself to breathe, or even open my eyes. I hold on and try not scream, lost to a sensation like falling or flying. I can feel nothing and everything at once.

"'Sephone. 'Sephone!"

Once, when I was very small, I accidentally wandered away from my dad and into the path of a car. I don't remember anything about the vehicle, I remember so little of the day at all, but I remember my father's scream.

This one is worse.

I think I pass out. I must. I remember nothing of the journey back to the palace. There's a dizziness that swallows everything else until I'm wrapped in blankets, back in my room.

Someone is still calling my name, shaking me roughly.

I open my eyes.

Hades, still streaked with green blood, his eyes back to gold but utterly wild.

"Don't shout," I manage.

He lets out a deep, shuddering sigh, and falls away from me. I hug the blankets closer, and for a long moment, neither of us speaks.

"All you all right?" he asks finally, sitting on the floor with his face in his hands.

I nod, because I lack the strength to speak. I wait for him to yell at me for sneaking out, but his voice has the same soft quality he used when talking to that spirit.

"You're trembling," he says.

"I'm cold."

"You may be going into shock. Can mortals die from that?"

"I don't know."

"You don't *know?"*

"A lot kills mortals. I haven't memorised everything."

He blinks at me, casting a strange, blank expression, as if he doesn't know how to react. "Is there anything I should get you?" he settles on.

"I fell into the River Styx, didn't I?" I manage.

"Yes."

"Will I… does it have any kind of an effect on mortals?"

"Not that I'm aware of, and you weren't in there for very long."

"I should… I need to get out of these wet clothes."

"Of course," he says, turning his back sharply. There's no crude comment about watching me undress, which I expected.

I drop my sodden garments to the floor and pull on a robe. Hades' ferrets away the wet mess with a snap of his fingers.

"What were those grey-green knobbly things?" I ask him. "And what were they doing?"

"Goblins from the Unseelie Court, out stealing souls."

"What do they want with them?"

"The price of a soul is pretty high; they can be used in any number of dark magics."

"Is that your job? Stopping thieves?"

"Part of it. I have to ensure the souls reach the Gate and that anyone stealing them is apprehended. Some days are quiet, others… less so."

"What happens when souls reach the Gate?"

"I have no idea," he says. "They come in at the Core, which you saw today, and they flow down to the Gate. I don't know how they come to be there, and I don't know what happens after. We are not gods."

He almost seemed like one today, killing that creature and then rescuing me a second later. I wonder if he lost a soul because of it.

"That soul that crawled out of the river today," I ask, "what would happen if it hadn't gone back in, or been snatched?"

He sighs. "If spirits don't go back into the Styx, they become wraiths, which can slip through the barriers into the mortal realm and be very dangerous. There's no returning a wraith to the river, and they can only be killed by celestial steel or the touch of Hades."

"And… what happens to it then? To the person it once was?" I am almost afraid of the answer.

"Nothing," says Hades. "If there is a world after this one, they are struck from it. No peace, no absolution. They are snuffed from existence, as surely as a candle. A fate worse than death."

And one he was keen to keep that poor creature from, though it was a stranger to him.

He has funny morals, for a monster.

And I'm still waiting for him to yell at me.

"I shouldn't have gone outside," I tell him. "It was foolish—"

"Yes," he agrees, "but also human nature. I should have explained it earlier, shown you the

dangers—"

"Explain it now," I urge him. "Tell me about the faerie courts. What's the difference between Seelie and Unseelie? Why do they need a yearly sacrifice?"

Hades exhales, shifting from the floor. He pulls out the chair from the table in the corner of the room and clicks his fingers, summoning a carafe of wine and a couple of goblets. He pours himself a generous measure and holds up the empty one to me.

"Um, no thanks."

He shrugs, sipping his.

"You need wine to tell this story?"

"I generally find wine improves most situations. Don't you?"

"Um…"

"Suit yourself." He takes another drink. "So, there are two primary Faerie courts: the Seelie and Unseelie Court. The Unseelie Court is led by King Valerian. It's composed largely of goblins and ghouls, trolls, ogres, some of the pixies… the traditional, trouble-causing kind."

"Right. So the Seelie court?"

He holds out his arms. "Is composed of the pretty ones."

My cheeks prickle, and I search for something that doesn't sound like agreement. "I'm sure there's more to it than that."

"Of course. We're also the more powerful ones, direct descendants of the Titans and the original Olympian Twelve. The Unseelie Court is a descendant of the monsters they made. There was a great war between them almost a millennia ago. The Seelie Court was happy to slide into the shadows of human society, to be worshipped no longer. The Unseelie Court wanted to hunt. A treaty was eventually reached. Initially it involved a great hunt every Samhain, but in recent centuries it's shifted to a single, prepared sacrifice instead."

"I see. So that's the price this King Valerian demands?"

Hades shrugs. "I suppose so."

"Do you think he'd prefer another war?"

"Valerian wasn't the one responsible for the initial uprising, and he's oddly reasonable, but I doubt he likes being under Zera's thumb. He's likely looking for any excuse to break the truce."

I pause, taking this in. The tradition, the culture, the danger. "You risked a lot, taking me from that place."

"Well, I am the devil, or so they say." He smirks, taking another long sip. "Isn't it my job to stir up trouble?"

"Why did you do it?"

He refills his goblet. "Perhaps I like trouble."

Perhaps is an excellent word for liars to use.

"I don't think that's the reason."

His silence is loud, but when he speaks, his voice is quiet. "What other reason could I have?"

I think of the Ferryman's words, that most of the faeries are human in the ways that matter, unless they've lived too long. And I don't think he has. He's doubtless older than I am, but he isn't *old.*

I think you might want the company, which makes your avoidance of me since I arrived all the more baffling. Baffling, or compassionate.

Definitely baffling.

"I don't know," I admit. *But I'll find out.* "On Samhain, you said if I didn't come with you, my

friend would die. Would you have killed her?"

Hades pales, as if ashamed of his words. "No. But I suspected others would if you both didn't calm down."

Inwardly, I release a knot of relief, glad that piece of darkness about him is dispelled.

He rises from his seat. "If you're sure you're all right and don't have any further questions, I will take my leave of you." He sweeps into a bow.

"Sure."

He moves towards the door.

"Hades?"

"Yes?"

"Thanks for not letting me drown in the River Styx."

He smirks. "My pleasure."

"And for… not letting me be killed as ritual sacrifice."

"Finally admitting I saved you, are you?"

"I—"

"It's all right. I get not wanting to feel thankful for a situation you shouldn't have been in in the first place. And that… you're paying for it." He looks down. "I'm sorry about the kiss. That's not how… I'm sorry."

"It's all right," I say. "You didn't have many other options."

"You are infuriatingly understanding."

"Infuriating?" I frown. "In what way?"

He shakes his head. "Good night, Persephone."

The softness of my own name on his lips stuns me, and I only find my voice after he leaves.

"Goodnight, Hades."

Days pass. The darkness still clings to the walls, but my heart feels lighter somehow. I slide into an uncomfortable routine, dispelling my boredom with endless craft projects, multiple failed attempts to teach Pandora how to do tricks, and dinners that take far too long to prepare. Hades doesn't seem to be avoiding me in the way he once was, but he's still rarely around.

Some nights I leave him dinner on the table, certain he can reheat it with magic, and wake to thank-you notes folded into different shapes.

I string them up above my bed alongside wonky tulips, roses and daffodils.

We slide into December. Dad's probably put up the tree and wrapped the first of the presents. Every year we would go to the Winter Wonderland at Hyde Park. He'd get a beer and I'd get a hideously overpriced German sausage. We'd go on the carousel together, no matter how old I got.

Not this year.

Would he even be putting up the tree? Or was that the sort of thing he only ever did for me? Would he still be putting it up, wondering why he was bothering? What would go through his mind when I wasn't there on Christmas day?

I think about asking Hades for Christmas decorations to soften some of the darkness in this place, and the darkness inside me, but I don't. It seems childish and silly, and pointless. A few lights aren't going to help me.

But one morning, when he asks me if I'm all right, I tell him I miss the sky.

He smiles, offers his hand, and takes me back to my room. I'm conscious of the softness of his fingers and the roughness of mine, chafed by endless crafts and too much cleaning.

He tugs his hands free and waves them towards the ceiling. The white plaster fizzles away to reveal dawn breaking through the clouds. It trembles with light, half-moving. The sun almost feels real.

"Better?" he asks.

"It's spectacular."

He smiles.

"Why don't you do this everywhere?"

"Maybe I like the dark."

"*Maybe* is as bad as *perhaps*. I know you're lying."

He snorts. "Fine. I have a reputation to keep up. The Lord of Night can't have sunshine and rainbows on his ceiling."

"If I was queen of hell, I'd have flowers everywhere. It would really surprise people. I'd look as nice as pie but be a badass on the battlefield."

"I'd like to see that."

"Which part?"

To this, he has no answer. "I'll stick with my feathers and scales."

"At least you've stopped short of skulls."

"Have you yet to see my door?"

I laugh, and he smiles, too. At the ball, I'd thought he was the sort to always wear a smirk, but here that isn't the case at all. His mouth seems strangely sad when not graced with a smile, the face of someone not used to doing it too often.

"Anyway," he says briskly, "I need to be out on patrol. I suppose I'll see you later."

"What time will you be back?"

He pauses, halfway out of the door. I realise what my words must have sounded like.

"I mean, it's not like I like you, it's just a little bit dull around here."

"And I am not?" he says, with a flash of a roguish grin.

"No. You are many things, but not boring."

He takes a step closer. "And what am I, pray tell?"

"Aside from incredibly irritating?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Am I really that irritating?"

"Perhaps."

His grin is halfway between sly and soft, and I dislike how it slithers into me, dislike noticing anything about his mouth at all, really.

"I'll be back around seven," he says, uncomfortably close. "Don't wait up."

"Wouldn't dream of it."

Except, of course, I do wait up. I don't quite count down the hours to his projected arrival, but my eyes keep drifting towards the clocks, their ticks itchingly loud whenever I become aware of the silence.

I distract myself by making notes on the botanical properties of different faerie plants, and wander the garden in search of them. I have no way of knowing the illusions from the real ones, but it provides me with a distraction which is all I want.

I should ask Hades what's real and what's not. I should ask him if I could grow things here.

Stop thinking about him, Sephy.

But what else is there to think about?

I try not to be annoyed when seven passes and he doesn't return. I retire to my chambers and crochet a very bad hat. It's so bad that I decide I can't possibly go to bed until I've made something decent, so I start the entire project over.

It's late by the time I hear the door open.

I'm not planning on moving. I'm finally tired, and I've no good reason to speak to him, but then I hear him stumbling and swearing under his breath.

I'll just check to see that he's OK.

I open the door. Hades blinks at me.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up. I know it's late. Ran into a nasty little group of thieves."

He's clutching his side, and the front of his doublet is wet. A redness clings to his fingers.

"You're bleeding."

"I've had worse."

"Let me help you—" I move towards him, but he inches back.

"It doesn't concern you. Let it be."

"But—"

"Don't—"

I jab his middle. He lets out a low howl.

"Damn you, woman!"

"You're *hurt*. Possibly badly. Let me see!"

"Why would you even care?"

"Um, because I'm not a terrible person?"

"You…" His words stop when he catches my gaze. "Of course you're not," he says, as if the words pain him more than the wound. He slumps against the wall, sliding backward. I dive under his arm.

"Any more complaints?"

"No," he says, his voice low.

I tug him down the corridor, pausing at the door while he dispels whatever magic is locking it. I haul him inside. A dark, sparse space rises to greet me, accompanied by a low, throaty growl.

"Hush, Fluffy," Hades snarls, but holds out his hand to the dogs nonetheless. They let out a low whimper. "I'll be fine. Just don't growl at Persephone, all right? We like her."

I feel a prickle in my cheeks and am initially thankful for the lack of light, until I remember that he can probably see through it. "Er, more light please."

The gloom dissipates, but only slightly. It clings to every dark piece of furniture and red velvet drape. The room looks like it was painted from a gothic novel; ornate wood, plush fabrics, and a wall of stained glass. It depicts scenes that must be fairly standard for the fae; wild hunts, stags, golden goblets and crowns of thorns and roses. Aside from the decorations and a stack of books beside the bed, it's a bland room, cold despite the splashes of crimson and midnight. Nothing warm, nothing personal.

"Hmm," I drawl, "I really must get the name of your decorator."

"Really?"

"No."

He really isn't used to people being able to lie. I lower him down to the bed and pull his hand away. He winces, stiffening beneath my fingers.

"I'm not going to hurt you."

"That's not what I'm afraid of."

I can't see the wound clearly through the fabric, so I start unhooking his doublet, peeling it away from his shoulders and discarding it on the floor. The shirt is next.

He sits half naked on the bed like a wounded god, the lean panels of his chest as perfect as a sculpture.

"Wow." The word eases out of me.

Hades raises an amused eyebrow, and I realise what I've said.

"You are freakishly pale," I add.

His smile drops. "You are pretty pale yourself."

"Yeah, but I'm *English rose* pale. You're never-seen-the-sun vampire pale."

I leave out the part where his skin shines like freaking alabaster and is porcelain smooth. I don't think he needs anything that sounds like a compliment from me.

I wonder if there's some truth to the never-seen-the-sun before part. How often does he visit the world above?

Why do I care?

I turn my attention back to the wound. It's a clean, long slice along the side of his abdomen, still bleeding a fair deal.

"I think this needs stitches," I tell him.

He snorts. "Am I to be your pig carcass?"

"If you don't want to end up with an ugly scar…" *or bleed out,* although I'm not sure he would.

“I am far too beautiful to have the word ugly attached to me.”

“Then—”

“I won’t need stitches. We heal too quickly. Just clean it up. It’ll start clotting soon.”

He clicks his fingers, and a vial appears in the air above him. He fumbles trying to catch it, swearing as it slips through. I snatch it before it can hit the floor.

“Good reflexes,” he says.

“A summer of sparring very badly with Libby.” I unstopper the vial. “What is this?”

“A sealant. It’ll clean it out too.”

I ease the cloth he holds from his fingers, applying the solution liberally to the wound.

“Is there anything for the pain?”

He grabs a bottle from the bedside unit and practically inhales it.

“Don’t get drunk to mask the pain!”

“Why not? Have you ever tried it?”

“I… no.”

He hands me the bottle.

“I don’t drink.”

He shrugs, necking it back.

“That really is a terrible idea.”

“It’s a delicious idea.”

He downs the remains and clicks his fingers, spiriting the bottle away.

“How does that work, exactly?” I ask him. “The summoning and vanishing thing?”

“I can’t create it out of nowhere,” he explains. “Everything summoned already exists, somewhere.”

“So you steal it?”

“Some of us do,” he admits. “Me, I only take it from where it won’t be missed. A box in a warehouse. A forgotten wine cellar.”

“Still stealing.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Miss High-and-Mighty, would you prefer that I starve?”

“Last time I checked, you can’t starve from lack of wine.”

“You’ve clearly never tasted excellent wine before…”

I continue to dab at the wound, blood already crusting to his perfect, porcelain skin. Flecks of something blackish rim the edge.

“Ow!” he hisses. “Be gentle.”

“Oh, sorry, I mistook you for someone tough.”

“Are you insulting the Lord of Night?”

“Is it working?”

A slight smile tugs at his lips. “You’re very rash.”

“You’re injured and sitting in a puddle of your own blood. I’ll take my chances.”

“I thought you’d be softer.”

“And I thought you’d be less squeamish, so we’re both disappointed.”

Hades cocks his head. “I’m not disappointed.”

I’m not sure what he means by this, so I shift the conversation, eyeing the cloth that came from nowhere. “Can all faeries summon things?”

He shakes his head, “Only the big eleven—the High Court—and only within our homes. I can’t summon anything outside the walls of this place. Also doesn’t work if I’m tired or weak. I probably

couldn't have managed that vial if my stock wasn't already on site."

I nod, and think over what he's just said. "There were twelve gods, if I recall correctly."

"After centuries of watching her husband's philandering, Hera eventually snapped and killed Zeus, taking the throne for herself. Since then, we have only had one monarch, who goes by the name of Zera."

I freeze. "The… the queen I met at Samhain, is that… is that *the* Hera of legends?"

Hades shrugs. "Honestly, we aren't sure. She's encouraged the rumour because she can; she's almost the oldest of us all. I think she just enjoys the reputation."

"Not something you can understand, I'm sure."

He smirks, and desperate to avoid his gaze, I turn my attention to the books beside the bed. They're the only thing about the room that aren't pristine; a small stack of well-thumbed books, a few crime thrillers, *Watership Down,* and a torn copy of the first *Harry Potter* book.

I gasp. "You *do* like Harry Potter!"

"I may have read them once or twice."

"This copy is falling apart."

"I may have bought it second hand."

"But did you?"

"I could have done."

I can't help grinning at him. "You're a fan. A secret fan."

"You're going to tease me about this mercilessly, aren't you?"

"Oh, I do hope so."

I finish cleaning the wound and he summons a set of bandages, which I start winding around his middle. His skin is warm beneath my fingers, and I'm aware how close to him I am, even more so when I shift behind his back.

A large tattoo of two black wings graces his spine and shoulder blades, neither surreal or realistic. They look like they've been painted on with a brush. Without thinking, I inch forward to trace one of the feathers. He shivers.

"Sorry, just admiring the skill. A glamour?"

"No. A very skilled half-fae artist. Had to use a bit of magic to ensure its permanence."

From what I understand about mortal tattoos, it's not a simple process, especially for something this large. It would have taken multiple sittings and have been extremely uncomfortable.

"Why bother? I mean, they're beautiful, but if you can change your appearance at will—"

"The point is, it's real," he says, angling his head towards me. The intensity of his gaze alarms me, and his cheeks are flushed. I wonder if he's running a fever, but then I see he's summoned another goblet of wine. And faeries can't get sick. "Do you really think they're beautiful?"

I tear my eyes down to the bandage and loop it round again. My gaze falls to a scar on the base of his spine, perfect and silver. Beneath the feathers are other tiny pucker marks. Battle scars? But his chest is flawless...

"Yes," I whisper, "they're quite beautiful."

"You think I'm *beautiful,"* he croons, and falls back against the covers, his cheeks a ruddy pink. What is in that wine?

"I think some artwork that somebody else has done is beautiful."

"When someone says they like your clothes, they aren't complimenting the designer."

"You have very good taste in artwork."

"Thank you, 'Sephone, I do."

I like the sound of *Sephone*. I rarely use Persephone, and I'm used to Sephy, but sometimes it does sound a little bit like a girlish nickname I should have left behind in childhood.

Not that I mind liking childish things, but… I like Sephone. I like how he makes it sound, all dark and soft, like a winter's fire.

"Do you have pyjamas?" I ask. His black silk sheets don't look very warm.

"I do," he declares. "Would you like to help me into them?"

I narrow my eyes. "I'm sure you can manage."

"Bedside table." He gestures. "Don't tease!"

I pull open the drawer and discover a silken pair of midnight-blue pyjamas decorated with lightning bolts. I smirk.

"I said, don't tease!"

"I said nothing."

"Your expression did."

I hold out the pyjamas. He pulls the top on, wincing slightly.

"Here, let me," I say, helping him with the buttons. My fingers shiver under the warmth of his skin, sending butterflies spiralling to the pit of my stomach. I try to ignore it all.

Hades regards me carefully, head tilted towards mine. "You said I could manage."

"Perhaps you can, but… I don't mind helping."

"Careful, sweet mortal," he says, his gaze heavy, "I may begin to think you like me."

"I may begin to think you're a decent person, but not if you keep flirting with me."

"Oh, so you know that I'm flirting, good." He stands up shakily, holding onto my shoulders to steady himself. I'm not used to boys being much taller than me, but he's at least a head above mine.

And yet he's close, desperately close.

He shucks off his trousers and slips into his others, before sliding back to the bed, clearly drunk.

"Do you need anything else?"

He pauses for a moment. "I need nothing."

I wonder why he didn't simply say 'no.'

"Very well." I turn to leave, but his hand reaches out and grabs my fingers. His touch is light.

"You could never disappoint me, 'Sephone," he whispers.

I shake my head. "You know, I really can't figure you out."

"Excellent."

"It's not excellent, it's infuriating. Are you this scary Lord of Night? Or a cocky, insufferable flirt? Or are you the one who says sweet things when his guard is down?"

"It's better you forget any time I'm sweet to you."

"Then why be sweet in the first place?"

"I can't help it."

"*Why* can't you help it?"

He blinks at me blearily, as if the answer is obvious. "You disarm me."

I disarm *him?* How could a powerful faerie lord ever be disarmed by a fairly ordinary human girl? No matter how much he looked like nothing more than a boy, and a slightly unguarded, vulnerable one at this moment.

It wasn't even like I was the first one he'd met.

There is no sigh deep enough to release the utter confusion of him. "You don't make any sense."

"I don't need to make sense when I'm this pretty."

I sigh, pulling the covers up to his neck. “Goodnight, Hades.”
“Do I get a kiss?”
“I said, goodnight!”
With a groan—and the whisper of a smile I’m sure he doesn’t catch—I leave the room.

The next morning, I head into the kitchen for breakfast to find Hades already there, scrambling eggs on the stove. The dogs are basking on a nearby rug, chewing a massive bone. They're so preoccupied that even the grumpy one doesn't bark at me.

"Morning," Hades says cheerfully. "Would you like some eggs?"

"Um… sure?"

He snaps his fingers, and the eggs disappear from his pan and appear on a plate on the breakfast bar, together with thickly-cut toast, a warm slab of butter, and a jug of orange juice. A vase of pink carnations tops it all off.

"Is this a thank you for yesterday?"

"Maybe I just want to spend time with you."

I slide across the room and put my hand to his forehead.

"What are you doing?" his gold eyes widening.

"Checking for a temperature." I inch up his shirt and pry the bandage away from his skin. The wound has healed over, leaving only a pink line behind. "That's insane."

He smirks, inching closer. "If you wanted to undress me, love, you could have just—"

I place the spoon from his pan against his lips. "Don't you ever get tired of flirting?"

"Yes, actually. But it's nice to do it with someone new."

I roll my eyes and return to my seat. That makes sense, I suppose. Is that what he does? Kidnaps girls, flirts with them, and takes them back when he's bored?

"Are you all right?" he asks.

"Fine," I say, shovelling eggs into my mouth. They're so soft and buttery that a slight moan escapes me.

Hades catches it, and flicks to grinning. "Good, are they?"

"They are… all right, I suppose."

"You're lying to me, aren't you?"

"Perhaps."

He slides into the seat next to me and tucks in himself. It seems strange to watch someone so powerful do something as human as *eating,* but even his table manners have an ethereal, elegant quality to them. He's as lithe and delicate as a cat.

A cat that can rip a goblin apart, that can impale a man through. However beautiful and ordinary he looks right now, he's still a killer.

With morals.

That imprisons young girls.

For a reason.

I hope.

Stockholm syndrome takes longer than this to settle in, right?

There's a knock on the main door. One of the dog heads growls. Hades looks up.

"Are you expecting anyone?"

"Rarely."

He gets up from his seat and heads out into the corridor, me trailing behind along with the dogs. He waves his hands and his loose clothing disappears into something sleek and dark. His eyes are rimmed with kohl, and a golden crown sits atop his head. He glances back at me. "Want me to dress you?"

"Er, um, I guess so?"

He smiles, and I find myself in a bronze gown dusted with pastel flowers. It's heavy and elegant, layers of silk and taffeta.

Damn, I need to let him dress me more often. Despite how dark and gloomy his place is, his taste really is impeccable.

"How… how do people get down here?" I ask him.

"Faeries or other creatures can teleport into a few spots within the labyrinthine halls of the Underworld, but people don't tend to *drop in* without an invitation. It's quite the journey to my doors."

With the spirits, the skeleton warriors, the Ferryman and whatever Unseelie creatures stalk the way, I don't doubt it. I wonder if he's nervous about the sort of person that could face all of that.

The banging continues. The dogs growl further.

Hades clicks open the doors.

Standing on the threshold is a beautiful faerie woman with golden skin, brown hair, and violet eyes. She looks to be in her early thirties, which of course means absolutely nothing. She wears a gown of lavender and golden circlet in the shape of braided wheat. I think I remember her dimly from the revel.

Hades stiffens. "Emetria," he says, in a low voice. "I was wondering if we'd be seeing you at all. Come to scold me for my behaviour at Samhain?" He flashes her a cruel grin.

She bows to him, but her actions are tense, forced. "Lord Hades."

He offers her a similar gesture. "A long way to come for a visit."

"Perhaps I was concerned about you."

He snorts.

Her eyes turn to me. "She looks better dressed than the last few of your mortal playthings."

"She does, doesn't she?" He smiles at her, but there is no warmth there, only ice. "She looks particularly fetching in a crown, don't you think?"

I put my hand up to my hair, and realise I'm wearing a wreath of flowers.

I really, really wish I could take a picture.

"Well, since you came all this way, I suppose you have something to talk about."

"Of course. Will you invite me in?"

"It would be rude not to." He lingers in the doorway, as if to bar her passage. They stare at one another for a long, dark moment, before he moves to allow her entrance. She brushes straight past me, not looking.

"You remember where the throne room is, right?" he calls after her.

She scowls back at him.

"That's a yes, then." He shakes his head, turning back to me, and leans down to whisper in my ear. "I've just installed a secret door in the library, should you wish to eavesdrop."

"What?"

"You heard." He winks at me, and sweeps off after Emetria.

I tiptoe along to the library. In the corner of the room is an ostentatious black door with the gold words, 'I am a secret door' emblazoned across it, along with a winky face.

Very subtle, Hades.

I pull the handle and step inside. A long, well-lit tunnel appears in front of me. I follow it down to the very end, where it stops in an elaborate panel. Hades has climbed atop his throne and is staring down at Emetria as if working out the different ways to carve her up. He looks all at once terrifying and completely bored.

The dogs lie a few steps below him, their gazes trained on Emetria.

"What news then?" says Hades, crossing his legs and lounging back in his throne. "Is our dear queen losing her composure over the little stunt I pulled?"

"She is not pleased."

"Oh, well, what's she going to do about it?"

"Lul—"

He tenses, leaning forward.

"*Hades,*" she corrects herself, "you need to be more careful."

"You think I should have let her die?"

Now it is Emetria who tenses. "I did not say that. I think what you did was… admirable. What I want to know is *why.*"

"Everyone always wants to know that. Why does Hades do what he does? Why does he kidnap mortal women? Why does he seem content down in the dark? Why is he so good at killing things? Why does he seem to enjoy it so much?"

At this, Emetria glances down.

"Why can't the answer simply be because I'm *bored?* Because I *like* doing these things?"

Emetria raises her chin, shaking her head. "You are not the boy I remember."

He snorts, but he is far from amused. "How well did you honestly know me?"

"Clearly not as well as I thought."

His fingers tighten on the armrest of his throne. He says nothing to this.

"The stories about what you do to the mortal girls," Emetria starts again, stepping closer to him, "how true are they?"

I inch forward. Hades' face is frozen, apart from the slightest twitch above his left temple. At first, I think he might be angry, but there is a sheen to his eyes. Sadness, or disappointment.

"I thought you were above rumours, dear Aunt Em."

Her breath hitches, almost imperceptibly. "I saw the last girl you brought down here. If you do anything like that to—"

Hades rises from his seat, and this time, there is no question as to his emotion. He's angry. Furious, even.

"But it's fine for me to do that to other mortals?"

His fury surprises me, or more, what it's directed at. He's not angry that she thinks he would hurt me, he's angry that she thinks he could hurt *anyone.*

Which means the rumours… have to be rumours, right?

But why does it bother him if she believes them? He's never defended himself before.

He shakes his head at her. "You like to pretend you're above Zera, but in reality, you are no better than she is. None of you *really* care."

"And you do?"

"More than you, evidently."

"You… you have no idea—"

"Don't I?" He raises an eyebrow. "I suppose I should offer you a place to stay for the night, since you came such a long way to see me, but in all honesty, I'd rather not. Unless, of course, you want to stay? You could chat to my charming little house guest. Check that she's all right."

Emetria tenses. "I'll leave," she says. "But I will see you again at the Solstice. I beg you, *don't do anything rash.*"

"I'll be as sensible as ever, Auntie Em."

"Be better," she says. "Because I know you can be."

She turns without another word, and sweeps out of the room. I wait until her footsteps have disappeared down the corridor.

And then I wait a little longer, processing everything I've just heard. Hades seemed determined to play the villain only to be disappointed when she believed him to be just that.

"Are you there?" he asks, casting a look in my direction.

"Yes."

The panel disappears, and I step into the room. The wall closes up behind me, and he gets off his throne and slumps down on the bottom step. I'm not really sure what to say, so I inch across the room and sit a few feet away from him.

"I liked your secret door. Very subtle."

He says nothing.

"Why did you let me overhear?"

"Just because you live in the Underworld, doesn't mean you should be kept in the dark." He does not look at me when he speaks, staring instead at the black polish on his nails.

"That woman," I start, "she was your aunt?"

"What? No." He shudders.

"You called her Auntie Em."

"Emetria," he corrects. "She's… a family friend. Or was. I suppose. She… she took me to the mortal world a few times, when I was a child. She liked to take me to this old-fashioned picture house. There was a film we watched there once. The Wizard of Oz. The nickname Auntie Em comes from that."

It didn't seem like he was using the name as a fond remembrance. It was almost like a taunt. But as he can't lie, I have to believe that is the reason.

It seems strange to imagine him as a child, and I wonder once more at his age. He'd gone as a child and called the cinema "old-fashioned", so it wouldn't have been new. I suppose that narrows his age range down to under a century.

"What happened between the two of you?"

Hades opens his mouth, but then closes it again.

"Sorry, that's a personal question—"

"No. Well, yes, but, that's not the reason I can't answer. It's decidedly complicated."

"Oh, well. I've got half a year down here to try and get you to open up."

The ghost of a smile. "I'm not sure it would take that long."

"What?"

"You're easy to talk to. When you want me to talk to you. I'm sure you could do a great deal in half a year."

I frown. "You're not… you're not under a curse, are you?"

He stares at me. "Why would you think that?"

"I don't know. I just think there must be some good reason you keep taking young women down here, and I thought maybe there's some curse they could free you from."

"*Someone's* read a little too much Beauty and the Beast growing up."

"It's an enjoyable tale."

"Is it? Why do you think that is?"

"I think it's easy to find the idea of being able to save someone just by loving them quite romantic."

"You don't feel that way?"

"In real life, love is rarely that transformative, and real monsters don't change because someone loves them. Beauty lucks out because her beast wasn't really a monster at all."

Hades tilts his head towards me, eyes intense, thought"What do monsters look like, then?"

"Like everyone else." I gaze elsewhere. "I'm paraphrasing from the original text. Dad loved—loves—fairytales. I like them too, and I get why others like that one in particular. It's nice to believe you can save someone just by being yourself. You don't need to be strong or smart or ride into battle. You just need to be there for someone."

He's quiet for a moment. "Could you—" he stops, shaking his head. "I'm not under a curse," he explains.

"Then the women—"

"It's complicated."

"Please," I tell him, "just… just tell me. Did you hurt them?"

He sighs, and I can tell he's disappointed that I asked at all. "No," he says. "Not at all. But that is all I can tell you, and I beg you not to tell anyone else."

"All right."

"Thank you."

He pauses, long and hard, his expression stiff as iron. I wonder if he plans to speak at all, or if I should break the silence.

"I am not cursed," he repeats, "but being Hades comes with certain conditions. I have a lot of power, far more than most of the High Court, but the price of this is that I can only step foot on mortal soil twice a year. Samhain being one of them."

"You're… stuck down here, for the rest of that time?"

"Yes."

"Alone?"

"Well, with the boys, of course."

The dogs inch forwards, and press three muzzles to his face.

"Did you choose this?"

"What?"

"You said it was a title, like… an inherited one? How does it work?"

"The previous lord or lady can mark one their successor." He pulls back his left sleeve. A small black mark is imprinted under the skin, a crowned skull surrounded by feathers. "This marks me as the current reigning lord. Usually people choose their children. It will fall to the eldest if no one is picked. The other way to take the power is by killing the previous one."

A coldness shivers through me. "And… and how did you…?"

"The previous Hades was my father," he says. "But the man now occupying Ares' seat is his eldest."

"Then, did he choose you, or—"

"Did I kill my father?"

"Yes."

He looks at me carefully. "What do you think?"

All I know is what I *want* to think. And I think I know what he wants me to say, too. He wants me to see what others can't, to see past the assumptions, the rumours. "I… think that if you did, you must have had a reason. Although I don't understand why you can't tell me what that reason might be."

Hades exhales, a flicker of lightness flashing across his features. It is gone in seconds, and he does not meet my gaze. "I killed him because he was probably already dying, and Emetria told me to."

"She… she what?" My mind whirls. "Why would you—"

"There was a time I would have done anything for her."

"What… what happened?"

"Emetria is kinder than a lot of the High Court, but she's still one of them. A schemer who uses people to her own end."

"And you?"

He turns to me sharply.

"You're not one of them?"

"I hope not," he says, "but then give me a century, and we'll see. What was it Nietzsche said? *'You either die a hero or you live long enough to see yourself become a villain.'*"

"That's Batman," I tell him. "Although Nietzsche said something similar." I think. I'm not sure. it sounds like something Nietzsche might say, from the few times my dad quoted him.

Hades does not laugh, his gaze still fixed on an endless spot on the stairs. Every muscle in him seems sharpened to a point. "It's a fine quote, and aptly applies to us. The oldest tend to be the most cruel."

"You must be young then."

"That almost sounds like a compliment."

"Almost."

He reclines against the steps. A fleeting, quiver of a smile passes over him.

"Do you… do you regret what Emetria made you do?" I ask. "Do you regret coming down here?"

"It was probably for the best, but sometimes. I miss the mortal world. It's messy and loud but even for a land of liars it's oddly real." He speaks as someone who has spent a lot of time up there, and earnestness gleams in his eyes. He cannot lie, but he's downplaying how much he enjoys it.

"Wait," I say, "you told me you could only go to the mortal realm twice a year, but you went after Samhain, to see my father—"

"I did."

"But… isn't that your two times?"

"Yes."

A strange realisation dawns. My stomach murmurs with something between panic and gratefulness. "You spent your only other allotted day doing that for me?"

"Well, what else was I going to do?"

"Thank you."

Hades shakes it away. "It was nothing."

"It wasn't nothing," I insist, "and thank you."

Then, without really thinking, I lean across and kiss his cheek. His skin is warm beneath my

lips, and my mouth tingles when I draw back. I'm careful not to touch it.

Hades eyes go wide. He looks more shocked than when I slapped him. He hangs there for a minute, like an animal caught in a snare, before I stand up abruptly.

"Come for a walk in the gardens with me," I say.

"What? Why?"

"Because you're upset, and it's calm and beautiful and might help you be less upset."

"I—"

"Can you think of a good reason not to?"

He pauses. "Yes," he says, "but I think I would rather ignore them."

He takes my hand, and doesn't let go when he's on his feet. I don't let go either, and try not to think about the warmth and the weight of his fingers linked into mine until we're standing in the glade and they fall away.

I dance on ahead through the clouds of luminescent butterflies, plucking flowers from the blue-green grass and weaving them into a crown which I force on him. He glamours away his golden one, insisting mine is better. We drift together through meadows and trees, winding down towards the waterfall. I hitch up my skirts, take off my sandals, and dip my legs in the water.

"You know, when I'm down here, I don't miss the mortal world so much," I tell him. "I miss Dad, of course, and my friends, but it's hard to miss London when you're next to *this*."

Hades sits down, not quite next to me. "This world is not as beautiful as you think it is."

"Then why stay here?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Why not leave? Pass the role on to someone else… if you can?"

"What? Throw down my fiery crown and run away to the mortal realm? It would cause quite the scandal. Maybe I will."

I blink at him. "Do you actually have a fiery crown?"

He grins crookedly, snapping his fingers. Flames erupt on his head. I scream, immediately launching forward to pat them out. Hades laughs, grabbing my wrists. "Sephy, relax, it's just an illusion."

I stop shrieking. "Oh. Of course. That makes sense."

He's still smiling. "You tried to put me out."

"Automatic reaction. It's not like I like you, or anything."

"Of course," he says, his narrow smile flickering.

"You called me Sephy."

"A slip of the tongue. It's not like I…" His voice trails off, because anything more would be a lie. He groans instead. "Dammit, woman."

I chuckle, flicking his chest. It is rock hard.

"Have you spent much time in the mortal realm?"

He pauses. "Not as much as I would like."

"What do you do there?"

"All sorts. Walk amongst the people and the trees, listen to other lives, try local delicacies, catch a mortal film. Examine the extraordinary in the ordinary."

I smile. "You make it all sound so beautiful."

"Ordinary can be, if you pay enough attention."

"And… what do you do here? For fun? It can't always be as busy as it is presently. What do you do when you're not hunting down soul thieves?"

"Watch an alarming amount of daytime cookery shows."

"Be serious!"

"I can't lie."

"But on… on what?"

His eyes widen. "Oh," he says, "I didn't tell you."

"Tell me what?"

"Come on," he says. "Follow me."

He takes me by the hand and leads me back to the room that contains nothing but a singular mirror and an uncomfortable chaise.

"This mirror can show you—"

"Anything?" I gasp.

He glares. "No, not anything. Anything *public*. It can't show you inside people's houses. Mirrors like that do exist, but they're considered dark magic. Not quite forbidden but… frowned upon."

"But you're the fearsome Lord of Night. Surely you don't mind a little dark magic?"

"I worry what I might do with a power like that," he says, not looking at me. "This one suits me fine. It has access to just about every show, ever made. For example, *Mirror, play episode one of Downton Abbey."*

Our faces swirl away, replaced instead with the image of a grand, stately home. Faint music starts to play.

"Amazing," I whisper. "Mirror, show me Hyde Park."

The stately home rolls away, replaced with green lawns and sparse trees.

"What else can it show?" I ask him.

"Why tell you? It's far more fun to watch you learn."

I can't work out if that comment annoys or amuses me, so I ignore it, dancing in front of the frame. "Mirror, mirror, on the wall, who is fairest one of all?" The image whirls again, conjuring a version of myself; a shining, shimmering, perfect version. Me, but not me. Me through a glimmering filter. "Oh, it's me!"

The whisper of a smile tugs at the corner of Hades' mouth, but he quickly squashes it. "It's probably only examining the two of us as we're the only living beings in this dimension."

"Are you saying I'm prettier than you?"

"I didn't say that."

"You think I'm pretty."

"It's possible that it doesn't work on faeries."

"You think I'm *pretty*."

"I would prefer to use the word 'tolerable'."

"You're only saying that to avoid lying, aren't you?"

"You are... getting good."

"Hades thinks I'm pretty," I say in a sing-song voice, spinning around him.

"I don't think you're pretty," he says abruptly.

I stop twirling, glaring at him. "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the *rudest* one of all?"

Hades' face appears in the glass.

"Oh, look, it *does* work on faeries!"

Hades glowers, his bright eyes burning. "I wish I could despise you," he hisses.

"But you *can't*."

"No," he says, as if the word was being wrenched from him. "I cannot."

The clock on the wall ticks.

"I should go and check the perimeters," he says. "It was madness there yesterday. Wouldn't want anything to happen because I was… distracted."

"By a pretty face?"

"I… I'll see you later, 'Sephone." He says, and then sweeps out of the room as if he's just said something to be ashamed of.

It's only when he's gone that the sting sets in. *He doesn't think I'm pretty.* It hurts more because I know he can't lie, because that means he absolutely doesn't think I'm pretty. Never mind that he implied that he liked me, that he *implied* I was more than 'tolerable'—he never would have been able to say he didn't think I was pretty if he didn't believe it.

I flop down on the uncomfortable couch and try to distract myself with a period drama.

It does not work.

I linger beside the mirror in my room for far too long after Hades' barb. I'm not unattractive. I always thought I was *kind of* pretty. Not a stunner, but not the sort of person people called 'not pretty'.

I suppose he could think I was something other than pretty. Cute. Or attractive.

I don't know.

And it shouldn't matter.

And yet it does.

Maybe I should be flattered that he flirts with me even though I'm not pretty. Maybe there's something else he likes about me.

Or maybe it's all just a distraction for him, and I should stop worrying about impressing my kidnapper.

Except he isn't my kidnapper, is he? He's my unconventional saviour.

I think I hate that more.

I sigh, and try to lose myself in making a scarf to match yesterday's wonky hat. It goes about as well as can be expected, as does every other project I turn my attention to. How does he not die of boredom down here?

No wonder he spends so much time out on patrol.

I do not see him for the next few days. I don't know if he's avoiding me or just working. A part of me is worried, but every time I think I should check on him, I hear him banging around, and know he's alive, at least.

Then, one evening as I'm getting myself a late-night snack from the kitchen, I hear him stumble in. He clicks open the door, grinning like a maniac.

"Sephy!" he cackles, slumping down in the seat. There's a bottle of wine in his hand, no goblet.

"Are you drunk?"

"Yes, quite a lot, actually. Don't worry, I won't try anything."

"Lots of guys say that, right before *they try something."*

"Aye, I'm sure they do, but I can't lie, remember?" He takes a swig of the wine, slips off the seat, and kneels before me. "I should probably stay away from grand declarations like, 'I will never touch you without your permission' in case I need to rescue you again, or something, but I promise I will not touch you *like that* tonight." Something glints in his eyes. "Unless you beg me to."

I groan. "Why are you drunk?"

"Because it's rather good fun and it makes it decidedly easier to talk to you while I'm inebriated."

"You got drunk to speak with me?"

"You know, I honestly have no idea. Isn't that funny?"

"You don't have a sense of humour."

"How rude. I do so have a sense of humour. I've just mislaid it somewhere. Help me look?"

He tumbles off the chair, laughing as he hits the floor, staring up at the underside of the seat.

"Well, it isn't here!" He giggles.

I sigh, slipping off my stool, and haul him back to his feet.

"Oh-ho! What are you going to do? Throw me down on the bed and ravage me? You have my full permission."

I shove him back on the seat. "I am not going to ravage you. Why would you want me to? You don't even think I'm pretty."

He frowns at me. "Because you're not pretty," he says, and tugs me into his lap. "You're *beautiful."*

I freeze, like a rabbit caught in the headlights. No one but Dad has ever called me *beautiful* before. The sincerity of his words and the seriousness of his expression shock me, and for a moment I'm struck utterly dumb.

I force a grin. "Oh my, the big scary Lord of Night thinks I'm beautiful, should I be flattered or scared?"

"Please be flattered," he says, a tremor unhidden in his voice. It almost sounds like begging.

My cheeks feel hot. "All right," I say breezily. "I'd return the compliment, but I think it's already very obvious that you are somewhat inhumanly attractive."

Hades swallows. "Perhaps," he says, just as nervously, "but I wouldn't be adverse to knowing *you* found me attractive."

I bop his nose, and wriggle away from him. "You're very pretty, Hades."

"Ugh. Even when you're telling the truth you sound like you're lying."

I laugh. "Need any help getting to bed?"

"Only if you plan to undress me again."

"You can change your outfit with a click of your fingers!"

"Yeah, but it disappears when I'm asleep. It's not the same." He rolls off the chair. "Ah, well, I'm sure I can manage. Thank you for the grace of your company tonight."

"Any time," I say, mostly meaning it. "And Hades?"

"Yeah?"

"You really don't have to be drunk to spend time with me. You can spend time with me whenever you like."

He smiles. "A dangerous offer. What if I always want to spend time with you?"

"I'll call your bluff."

"But I can't lie."

"You are excellent at skirting around the truth."

"That I am," he says. He strides unsteadily back into the room, and raises my hands to his lips. "I'll endeavour to be sober when I speak to you tomorrow."

"I'll endeavour to be awake for it."

He laughs—actually laughs—and it's a strangely beautiful, intoxicating sound, the whisper of a firework in the distance, the crackle of a flame against a log. I had heard him laugh at the revel, a hard, cold, cruel noise, but this was something else, warm and real and bubbling. A laugh that sinks right through me.

He kisses my forehead. "Thank you, again. Goodnight, 'Sephone."

"Goodnight, Hades."

I watch him as he disappears, my eyes threaded to his form, tied unconsciously by a force I can't quite explain, or don't want to.

He thinks I'm beautiful.

I have no idea what to make of that.

I go back to my room, lie in bed, and try to think of another meaning in his words, a way out of his confession. I can't believe I was so annoyed when I thought he didn't think I was pretty and now I'm here, obsessing over the fact that he *does*. Frightened by the fact that he does.

I don't know why I'm scared, but I know I want tomorrow to come faster, just so I can see him again.

I do not like where this is going.

The next morning, he leaves me an apology breakfast along with a small bouquet of gypsophila and carnations and slinks off without a word, taking the dogs with him. Pandora and I spend the rest of the day together, making full use of the mirror and knitting slightly better scarves. She chases my wool around the room, easily satisfied.

I try not to think about the flowers, or his words, and fail at both.

He comes to my room late one evening.

"Fancy a walk of sorts?" he says.

I blink. "I'm already dressed for bed."

"I can glamour you if you're really bothered, but trust me when I say that nightgown is actually perfect."

I frown, intrigued. "I'll grab some shoes."

I run into the wardrobe and fish out a pair of sandals, buckling them on and grabbing my robe. Hades offers me his arm but steers me not in the direction of the gardens, but towards the outside.

I stiffen.

"Don't worry," he says, "I'll keep you safe."

"Oh, will you?" I arch an eyebrow. "Because I remember a bloody incident a few nights ago…"

"'Twas a scratch." He pauses. "We need not—if you don't want to—"

"Oh no, I want to, I just want to tease you about it first."

A few weeks ago, Libby was begging me to go out with her, to a place where the most likely danger was awkward drunks and broken toes. And now here I am, allowing myself to be whisked off to some unknown corner of the Underworld, where I know the dangers are much, much worse.

Perhaps it's because there's no Dad to fret, no ivory tower to return to. Perhaps it's because I feel like the worst has already happened.

Perhaps it's because, foolish though it may be, I'm rather starting to trust him. And I don't think he'd be suggesting I come with him unless he believed it to be safe.

We exit the palace. Down by the river, the Ferryman waits with his boat, glamour up. The vessel is strung with lights and flowers, so elegant that I almost don't notice the spirits brushing beneath it. Faint, soft music plays, hiding the low wails beneath a melody of honey.

Hades holds out his hand to help me on board. I'm once more conscious of his smooth skin under my rough palms, and think about other things, spots and freckles and hair, parts that I'd never thought to be self-conscious about before.

Especially my freckles. Freckles are cute. It's silly more faeries don't have them.

I settle down on one of the seats. The Ferryman pushes us away from the bank. Hades sits ahead of me, not smiling, not quite.

"Is this a date?" I ask.

"Why does everything have to be a date? Maybe I just like fancy boats."

"With flowers? Music?"

"I like flowers and music." The whisper of a grin.

"Sure," I say. "If it *was* a date, I'd definitely be underdressed. But you'd be doing really well."

Hades looks across the water, and for a second, I swear his cheeks go pink.

We row down the river, and I try to ignore the souls beneath us, concentrating instead on the music and the lights, twinkling above. We draw down a tunnel, and emerge somewhere else.

"Did we just pass through a portal?" I ask, staring back into the darkness.

Hades nods. "Charon here has a way of getting around a little quicker than most."

The Ferryman nods, and half a smile flickers there.

We drift onwards, through tunnels and caverns, and I have the faint feeling we're moving upwards. There's a lightness in my chest, a faint popping in my ears; doubtless things that bother neither of my companions.

Slowly, the boat glides to a bank. Hades leaps off, light as a cat, and holds out his hand for me to follow.

"It'll be dark for a bit," he says, "hold onto me."

We enter a tunnel devoid of all light, and I grip his fingers tightly as the darkness thickens. We walk for several minutes.

"Where are we—"

"Ssh," he whispers. "We're nearly there. Don't startle them."

Them?

The faintest of light prickles into the tunnel, like silver mist. Ahead is a cave that looks more like a glade, the sides sheathed in vines, all gathering around a perfect circular hole in the ceiling. Moonlight and stars cascade down.

"Is that—"

Hades smiles. "This is the only point in the Underworld where you can truly see the sky. It's protected by a barrier and usually tightly patrolled by my guards, but I don't mind if a few nymphs sneak in now and again."

"Nymphs?"

He points ahead. A group of women are converging in the centre. Some are thin whispers; skin like milk, hair the soft sheen of sunlight through a fog, wind made human. Others are round, like renaissance statues, sculptured generously, with brown satin skin and curls as wild as firelight. A rainbow of colours, shimmering blue, dusky pink, forest green. Some look like they are carved of marble, or ice, or water, or summoned from the essence of a wood.

They only have two things in common:

One, they are impossibly beautiful.

Two, they are all completely naked.

"Oh," I say, "I really *am* overdressed."

Hades presses a hand to the small of my back, his breath close to my ear. "Watch," he whispers.

It is not a hard instruction to follow, for I find it impossible to look away.

The nymphs throw their hands up into the air, and moonlight floods the space. Music shines

through the air, touching me in places I didn't know I had. Their bodies bend together, flawless in their synchronicity, their imperfect beauty. They are in perfect time, even though some move as though weightless and others as if mountains tremble at their footfall. My heart thrums in my chest, transformed into some flighty creature, desperate to break free.

The dance is endless, the music gliding seamlessly from one movement to the next, as impeccable as the sway of their bodies.

Above them, the starlight seems to swirl and shake, the barrier between worlds bubbling, casting iridescent shadows on the rocky floor. I am cut free of any earthy bonds by the swell of the music and the beat of their crescendo. If ever I was a prisoner, I am dissolved of those shackles now. A feeling all at once beautiful and dreadful brightens within me, and I wonder how I shall ever return to my normal mortal life after seeing something like this.

The nymphs slow, almost stopping, and I find the strength to turn to Hades.

"Why did you show me that?" I ask him, my gaze half-on the dancers still. "Are you trying to like, er, woo me, or something?"

He pauses. "If you're asking whether I brought you up here in order to seduce you, the answer is no."

His phrasing is strange, and I know there's something else he's not saying.

"But?" I prompt.

"I am not entirely adverse to the suggestion of seduction in principle."

I grit my teeth to hide my grin. "I'll bear that in mind."

Hades looks at me, something flickering in his eyes. I can't discern it. "Does that mean—"

A low, frantic howl cuts across his question. Three goblins stream into the glade, followed by something blue-green and shapeless. The nymphs scream, splitting off down the tunnels, leaping into the moongate or vanishing into the foliage. One of the goblins falls, and before either of us can move, the shapeless mist covers him.

Not quite shapeless, not any more. It has the faint outline of long, clawed fingers, and an eyeless face with only the rough shape of a nose. A fanged gap of a mouth rises over the goblin, its jaw dislodging like a snake's.

It sucks the goblin dry, draining a silvery breath from its face.

A wraith.

"Stay behind me," Hades insists.

He races towards it. The wraith registers his presence, drawing backwards as he swipes. It moves like liquid, even faster than Hades. One of the goblins tugs at the corpse, removing vials filled with spirits from the bag at his side.

"Stop!" I yell, before I can think of how stupid that is, before it registers that they're armed, and we're outnumbered, and I don't have any way of defending myself.

But it's not the goblins that notice me. It's the wraith.

It swoops towards me, and before I can even scream, I'm being wrenched off my feet, covered in this intangible, swirling mass. We hurtle towards the moongate and I feel every cell in my body jolt with energy, as if being electrified. I tumble out elsewhere, not into the outside, but another cavern, one with air like ice and a round pool of silvery water.

The wraith whirls, shaking itself, as if confused. I don't think it meant to take us here. I doubt I can outrun it, doubt I have long at all until it collects itself and comes after me again.

I make a snap decision, and hurl myself into the pool.

I force myself to keep my eyes open this time, waiting for what the wraith will do, waiting for

the more benign spirits to come rake and stir at my flesh, hoping their presence will disguise mine. But they don't come. This pool is empty, empty apart from strange, round bubbles drifting in the slightest current.

My eyesight is poor, but I swear there's something inside them. They shimmer like rolls of film.

The light of the wraith disappears, and I break to the surface, trying to keep my breaths low and shallow until I'm certain it's gone.

But there is only blackness, blackness and the silver light of the water.

I haul myself out, trembling with cold, surprised my breath isn't misting in the air. I should probably keep moving, but I don't know where to go, or if the wraith will double back and find me.

I turn my attention back to the water. A bubble breaks to the surface, and I reach out to touch it. It unravels across the pool, showing a scene of a palace of white and gold, a throne room different to Hades' in every way. It has no ceiling, only bright blue skies above it.

A party is underway. Some small pixie creature stands in the centre of a group of people. I recognise Ares, and maybe a few others from Samhain.

"No tithe for your queen?" Ares croons. "Then you must pay the price!"

He kicks her, and the pixie screams. Others jeer, and a small black-haired boy runs out from underneath the tables. I think he means to intervene, but he stops the second Ares glares at him. There's a quiet tremble, followed by absolute stillness.

I see the boy's whirring behind those glistening eyes of topaz, the fear, the guilt, the humiliation. In the end, he does what most boys his age *would* do.

What everyone else wants him to.

He goes forward and spits in the creature's face.

The queen, on her golden throne, smiles.

"Keep going…" she says.

I dash the image with my fist. I don't want to see any more, certain he did exactly what she asked. It curls up like a page against a flame, and sinks below. Another image floats to the top, this time with a throne room I recognise.

A woman—a faerie—cowers beneath Hades' shadow. He stands in front of her, eyes red, fingers ending in talons. He's shaking with barely-contained rage.

"Please," says the woman, "please… please don't. I had no choice—"

"There's always a choice," Hades returns, but his voice doesn't sound like his, it sounds like some kind of animal, stuffed into a human suit. It's distorted. A snarl. A roar.

He lunges forwards.

I don't close it fast enough to avoid the screams. The image sinks down, but the sound of claw sinking into flesh remains, gurgling lungs, twisted muscle. It echoes around the chamber.

I almost throw up.

"Persephone!" a voice screams through the dark.

I half don't want to call, too shaken by what I've seen, what I've *heard*. But where else can I go?

"Here," I call out weakly.

Hades appears, pale and breathless. He stops for a moment in front of me, eyes appraising my dripping form, checking for injury, I think. I expect that to be it, and am completely unprepared when he shoots forward and clutches onto me, his fingers coiling around the damp silk of my nightgown. He shakes, from the run or fear, I'm not sure. I don't have the strength to hold him back, or the desire, but I can't hold him back, either. Not after what I've just seen.

He grabs my face. “Are you all right? The wraith—”

“I hid in the pool,” I whisper numbly, stretching a hand towards it. “It was… cold.”

He takes off his jacket and holds it over my shoulders. “But you’re not hurt?”

“I’m not hurt.”

He breathes, long and slow.

“Did you catch the wraith?” I ask.

“I killed it, yes.”

“And the thieves?”

He shakes his head. “I didn’t bother with them when I realised you were missing.”

All those lost souls…

I turn back to the pool. “What is it?” I ask.

A muscle twitches in his jaw. “A pool of forgetting,” he explains, “where you can store memories you’d rather forget.”

I swallow, staring at the waters, now turned inky black beneath his shadow. “And do you?” I ask. “Forget, that is?”

“No, not completely.”

“Then why—”

“Just the action of putting them out here seems to help.”

“Right.”

He waits for a moment. “Did you see anything?”

“No,” I say, but I do not know if I lie to protect him or myself. I only know that I wouldn’t want anyone to see that part of myself. And neither does he. However much of a monster he appeared in that scene, he is ashamed of it. I don’t think villains are supposed to be ashamed. But I’m not sure I can count on that, either.

I shiver.

“Come,” he says. “Let’s get you back.”

My dreams are filled with screams, with visions of blood and ripped wings, of pleas for mercy and a red-eyed face devoid of anything but rage. I wake several times, panting, the silk sheets stained with sweat, convincing myself it was all a dream.

Only, of course, it wasn't. Just a memory that wasn't mine.

Perhaps I should have told him, given him a chance to explain.

My stomach churns.

But how could you explain something like that?

He held me so gently on the way back, and clung to me so tightly when he saw that I was safe, it seems impossible to believe that there was anything in him violent or dark at all. But there is something in him he can't give voice to, something so full of rage he turned to a magic pool to try and disperse it.

It takes me so long to get to sleep that I'm late getting up. I think I've probably missed the chance to see him before he heads out, so I head to the kitchen in my dressing gown with my hair all over the place.

Hades is sitting at the breakfast bar, conversing with a small, winged woman. She's half my size, brown-skinned and freckled, with a shock of amazing, dark orange curls, almost like a flame. Her eyes are liquid amber, and a pair of red-yellow wings drape down her back.

"Ah, 'Sephone, good morning," Hades croons. "Please, come join us. This is Irma."

"I… I'm not dressed," I mutter.

He clicks his fingers, and I'm back in the outfit he magicked for me the other day. It's a bit ostentatious for breakfast, but I help myself to toast and orange juice without complaint.

"As I was saying, this is Irma," he continues. "She's here to organise a wee soireé I'm obliged to host near the end of the month."

"Soireé?"

"The Winter Solstice," Irma explains. She has a warm, slightly gravelly voice, which makes her sound older than her appearance suggests. She's probably ancient. "Traditionally celebrated in the World of Night. Quite the event."

"Irma will be flickering in, arranging things for me," Hades explains. "She's given her vow not to tell anyone anything about you, so don't worry about hiding in front of her."

"What have I to hide?"

"What indeed," says Irma, smirking.

"Just be your usual, delightful, unglamoured self," Hades says, winking at me.

I don't return it, not even with a smile, my mind still lodged between the visions of him I witnessed last night. I nibble at my toast instead. "Why do you need someone to organise things for you? Can't you just snap your fingers and have the whole place decorated in an instant?"

Both Irma and Hades clutch their chests.

"It's all right," says Hades, recovering quickly, "it's a fair question. So, summoning and

glamouring an entire party by myself would be impossible; it would require too much energy. Secondly, it's considered a bit… tacky, shall we say, to glamour too much. Most faeries can tell when something is glamoured even if they can't see how. The more real or authentic something is, the greater the effort."

"Makes sense. Kind of like spending money on something in the mortal world."

"Precisely," he says. Then his confidence simmers. "Would you mind coming with me to the throne room?"

"Sure," I say.

"Excellent. Irma," he says, clicking his fingers and unrolling a huge breakfast spread, "please help yourself."

"Oh, I intend to," she says, loading a plate with bacon.

Hades and I glide into the corridor. "Where does the food come from?" I ask him. "If the objects are essentially pilfered, what about food—"

He winces. "You won't like the answer."

"Tell me."

"You're probably not really eating what you think you're eating. Same basic nutrients, stolen from scraps here and there. The glamour just makes it taste like whatever you think it *should* taste like."

"Are you kidding? That's amazing." My chest lightens. "Could you glamour vegetables into tasting like cheeseburgers? Because that would be awesome."

He smiles. "Vegetable cheeseburgers from here on out. As the lady commands."

We arrive in the throne room, and I shudder to a stop, like a car on the brink of stalling. This is where he killed that woman.

He glances back at me, fingers skimming my elbow. "Are you all right? Yesterday—"

"Sucked," I say. "Well, the end part of it. The part before—"

Wondrous. Magical. Carved into my heart. Which just makes the rest of it so, so…

"I'm sorry," Hades says. "I never should have—"

"I saw something," I tell him, before I can lose my nerve. "In the pool. I lied. I didn't want to tell you because… I suppose I wasn't sure what… what it meant. And I knew you were ashamed, but I saw you killing someone."

Hades looks away. "I've killed a lot of people."

"This one, she was begging—"

His jaw twitches, and I know he knows the one I mean. "I can't explain to you all the bad things I've done. I can't reason and ration them all. I don't *want* to make excuses for the monsters in my past."

"And are they? In your past?"

He tilts his head, regarding me carefully. "I hope so. But I know I am capable of doing them again, if called for."

"Was *she* called for?" I ask, half begging. *Please give me a reason you had to kill her.*

He exhales. "I am Lord of the Underworld, but I do not cast judgement."

"That isn't an answer!"

"I could justify her death. Others would not condemn me for it. Is that what you wanted to hear?"

I stare at him stonily for a solid second before wrenching my eyes from his. "Yes." I march ahead of him into the throne room, over the spot, trying to dispel the power it has over me. It half

works, but I feel his gaze drift over my body. I wonder how haunted he is by that moment, if he ever remembered the swirl of her blood against the polished black floor. "Why are we in here?" I ask.

Hades looks uncomfortable, by my question, or our previous conversation, I do not know. "Everyone who's anyone will be at the Winter Solstice. As my abduction of you was so public, people will be expecting you to be there. And be… not yourself."

"Be some submissive, meek little mortal, you mean?"

"Yes," he replies, his voice like stone. "It is going to be, quite frankly, horrific for you. I don't even know… people might say things to you. *Do* things to you. And I may not be able to protect you."

My throat tightens, and I try not to conjure visions of whatever that could entail. "I see."

"It might be best if I glamour you. Make the entire night pass in an instant—"

"No!" I say sharply. "Please, I don't want to… it'll be like being drugged. I think *not* knowing would be worse than knowing, wondering what…"

"I would never do anything to you without your permission," he says. "You must know that?"

"I… yes." I say. "But what about these other people? What would *they* do?"

"Nothing too far. It would be considered, er, rude, to do too much to a favoured ensorcelled mortal but many delight in pressing boundaries. And faeries… their lines tend to be different from mortals'."

I think for a moment, unable to stop myself from imagining something like a repeat of Samhain. Maybe it *would* be better not to remember. But I still think wondering what happened would be worse. "Let me go as myself," I ask. "If it gets too much, I can always come to you during the party, right?"

He nods. "Me, or Irma, if I'm not available. I don't completely trust her, but she's given her word on this."

"You don't trust her?"

"I don't trust anyone. Why do you think I let skeletons guard the borders? Dead men tell no tales."

"That's morbid."

He shrugs. "We might need to practise you acting like you're a glamoured pet of mine."

"I'm sure I'll be fine. I'm an excellent actress. Once played the role of Titania in a school production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream.* Although I think they only wanted me in the play because I bought my own costume. Whatever. I was still good."

Hades smirks. "I'm sure you were a delightful faerie queen."

"You know what, Lord of Night? I rather was."

At this, I feel lighter, more normal, the darkness of that awful stolen memory ebbing away. Hades must feel it too, because he's still smiling when he clicks his fingers. Music swirls around the dark chamber, and the blue flames flicker in a kaleidoscope of colour.

"What's this?" I ask.

"Music. You may be expected to dance. I need to see that you can."

"Well," I say, dipping into a low bow, "as my lord commands."

I'm just about to twirl into the music when a voice sounds down the corridor.

"Lord Hades! Your dog has eaten my bacon!"

Hades sighs. "My *dogs* have eaten your bacon, woman!" He looks at me. "I'll be right back."

He disappears, and the music—a light, lilting, classical tune—flows into me. I dance anyway, turning and swirling with the rhythm, recalling the nymphs of the night before. I am not what anyone would call a *natural* dancer, but I generally make up for my lack of innate skill with sheer

enthusiasm. I have always loved it.

I pretend I'm a moonbeam, a bubble on a breeze, a reed in the water, that my body is as flexible as a willow. I pretend until I can almost imagine it.

I wheel around, and Hades is behind me. My gasp falls away as he slides a hand around my waist and glides the other against my palm. The heat of his skin ripples through me, and he's close, so close. He spins me around the room, and I'm light and heavy all at once, like I'm floating and sinking in the same breath. I feel flushed and drunk and delirious, and the music feels like it's transformed into something tangible, thicker than a fog, heavier than a summer heat. Colours have shapes and edges, sharp as knives and soft as feathers. I am terrified of the music stopping. I am terrified of it continuing.

Slowly, it slides away. We stop in the middle of the floor.

"You're trembling," he says.

"It's the music."

"As long as you're not frightened of me."

"No."

But I am frightened. And not because of last night, and the pale memory of a monster. I'm frightened because I'm attracted to him.

"New song," I say quickly.

"What?"

"New song. Something classic rock."

"Most faeries find that far too modern. What would the purpose be?"

"Fun, Hades. Fun is the purpose. You know fun, right?"

"Barely, until recently."

I try to ignore the weight of that, the impossibly sad *truth* of it, and the heaviness of 'recently'. I swallow both away. "Classic rock, please."

He clicks his fingers, and a tune rumbles through the obsidian halls. A song my father and I listened to countless times as we did the 'big kitchen clean' on a Sunday morning. We'd slide along the slippery floors and pretend our mops were mics.

It's perfect. Something punchy and fast that doesn't require touching, and reminds me of home in a way that doesn't make me ache. Hades laughs at how ridiculously I move, and then falls into the exact same rhythm. His hair comes loose, falling around his cheeks, and he looks like a flushed, wild, beautiful kind of ordinary.

I barely breathe until the song stops, standing there giddy with laughter. If there was a soft surface nearby, I'd collapse onto it.

I wonder if he'd collapse with me.

"Ahem," says a voice by the doors. "Not exactly what I'd call dance practice, Lord Hades."

Hades sticks his hands in his pockets and shrugs indifferently. "I don't need to practise."

"She does," says Irma.

"Rude," I say. "True, but rude."

Irma whips out a golden notebook and a feather pen. It hangs in the air and starts to write itself. "I'll add you to my to-do list," she says primly.

"I'd add her to my to-do list too, if she'd let me," says Hades. His smug smile makes me want to slap him.

"Ugh," I groan, "you're impossible!"

"But irresistible?"

"Resistible!" I insist, trying to ignore the hot bubbling sensation inside me. "Definitely resistible!"

"Methinks the lady doth protest too much."

"Methinks the lord has an ego far too large."

"Ahem," Irma coughs again. "I have a very long list to get through, you know."

Hades waves a hand. "Do whatever you like, Irma. Call me if you need me to summon anything. I've laid out a bedroom for you. Usual door."

I sense that I'm probably supposed to leave now, so I utter a quick goodbye and slip from the room. An extra door has been added to the corridor, one with tiny flames carved around the handles. My own has flowers. I don't know when they got there, but I like them.

That night, I lie awake beneath my canopy of roses with something strumming inside me, some new, uncertain feeling I have no true name for. A wicked, pulsating attractiveness.

Hades. I can't stop thinking of him, can't shake the weight of his body against mine, the softness of his fingers in my hand. The gleam of his golden eyes burns with fiery intensity, cutting through the dark of my room. Every whisper of his drifts like a phantom in the gloom as I try to unravel their meaning, the uncertain wonder of his maskless expression.

I can't see him as a murderer, but I don't understand him, or my gritty, tangled feelings.

When I was a little girl, my father told me the story of the original Hades and Persephone. My heart swelled with sympathy when I thought of him in the Underworld by himself, and I hugged my stuffed bunny and came close to tears. "Poor Hades," I sighed.

Dad wasn't impressed. "No, no, Sephy, you're missing the point. He *kidnapped* her. We don't kidnap people. It's not nice."

"But he was so lonely!"

"Reasons don't matter, daughter. Actions do."

I thought about this for a moment, not willing to stop defending him, even if, in principle, I did agree that kidnapping was bad.

"How do you know he kidnapped her?"

"What?"

"It says he *took* her. You take me to the park. You don't kidnap me. Maybe she saw he was lonely and wanted to cheer him up. Maybe she wanted to run away from her mother. You don't know."

"That… is a good point."

"I guess we don't know, do we? The girls never get a chance to speak in these stories."

He patted my head. "Also a good point."

"Did Hades do any other bad things? Like Zeus, and Athena—"

"Don't get me started on Athena," Dad grumbled. "And… no. Hades doesn't really do anything else bad at all."

"Then why is he always the villain?"

Dad paused for a moment, mulling it over. "Every story needs a villain," he says eventually. "And he looked like one."

The next morning, the minute Hades leaves to patrol, Irma drags me into the throne room and gives me my first dance lesson.

"Glamoured people dance in two ways; with great enthusiasm, or as if in a trance," she explains.

"Which should I do?"

"Trance," she says. "You'll burn out otherwise. Hades doubtless plans to plant a mark on you to ensure no one else can glamour you into doing what they ask."

"Won't they think that's strange?"

"That's standard, for him."

"Sweet," I say sarcastically.

Irma, of course, doesn't understand this. "It's *possessive*. Or it looks it, which is what he wants."

I wait for a moment, stringing my thoughts together. Irma has clearly known him for a long time, and even if he doesn't completely trust her, she might be willing to trust *me*. "Why does he go through all this effort to appear like someone he isn't?"

She snorts. "Not one of the High Court is who they appear to be."

Why would anyone go through life—especially an immortal one—pretending to be someone they weren't? How did you know where your mask ended and you began? "It can't be that simple."

"It isn't," she says tartly. "But it isn't my story to explain. Now, dance."

Hades has obviously given her some sort of power within his realm, because she controls the music just as easily as he can. She clicks her fingers and it swirls around the room, slow and steady. I dance obediently, following the steps she models, speeding up when the music does and slowing down when it stills.

"Glamoured folk always become one with the music. It's like they have nothing else in their brains."

We practise for what feels like hours, in heels and flats, to all sorts of rhythms, until every muscle aches. Irma doesn't seem to have much appreciation for my poor mortal body.

"I'm out of breath!"

"Then you need to practise more." She pinches my sides. "Hmm, are all mortals as round as you? Does it slow you down?"

I narrow my eyes. I'm not fat by any stretch, but I have curves the faeries seem to lack—all of them willow-slim. "Are all faeries as rude as you?"

"Is it rude to call someone round?"

"Umm, yes?"

"Hmm. Strange. Round isn't rude, round is just different. And less aerodynamic."

We take a brief break, and then Irma begins to instruct me on how to act glamoured in conversation.

"Don't speak until spoken to. And even then, only answer questions. Don't look people directly in the eyes. And give the vague answers you mortals are known for. Or lie, I suppose. That would work too. You think you can do that?"

"Hades seems to think so."

"He's besotted with you. His judgement can't be trusted."

My cheeks prickle. "You… you can't know that." At best, he's attracted to me. He hasn't known me long enough to be *besotted*.

"Pfft. Sure I can. That boy thinks he's a master at deception—and perhaps he is—but I can see through him. I organised revels for his father. I've known him since he was a child."

"How old is he?"

"He likes to pretend he's old, but he's scarcely any older than you, girlie. Or not in the equivalent years. You mortals age so fast. Mayflies."

"Thanks."

So he isn't some centuries-old creature. I'm not sure how to feel about that. It's about the only thing we have in common.

Well, that and some of our taste in literature. And maybe a love of dancing. I didn't ask him yesterday if he enjoyed it, but he was obviously very skilled.

Irma tests me in acting glamoured, firing off questions and trying to trick me with well-phrased statements and mild insults which get progressively worse the longer I say nothing. I focus on anywhere but her eyes; the end of her nose, a spot on the floor, her puckered forehead. It's something they taught us in theatre club, for not breaking during freeze frames.

It is not very fun, but Irma is largely satisfied.

"It's nearly lunchtime," she declares. "I hope our generous lord has summoned us an excellent spread. Going to the bathroom first. Meet you in the kitchen?"

"Sure."

She flutters off, and I hang about the room a little longer, not eager to be back in her company.

"Psst, 'Sephone!"

I glance over my shoulder. Hades has opened up a new door in the wall and is peering around the makeshift frame.

Despite myself, I feel a grin sliding across my face. "What are you doing here?"

"Hiding from Irma. Also coming to sneak you away."

"Away? Where?"

"I'm giving you a tour of the Underworld. Mainly so you don't try to explore it by yourself."

I glance down the corridor. "Irma will be mad if I—"

"She's usually mad. Come on. We're in charge here."

"You're hiding from her in a wall."

"You never met a hypocrite before?"

I laugh. "I take it back. You do have a sense of humour, and I rather enjoy it."

There's something almost bashful and boyish about his next grin. "Excellent. So you'll come with me?"

"Oh, all right." I take his hand and step into the tunnel, clutching onto his arm. It's impossibly dark. "You turned off the lights on purpose."

Hades squeezes the hand tucked into the crook of his elbow. "Not going to lie, I did."

"You are a mean, cruel person."

"That is what they say…"

We emerge past the kitchen and scuttle out of the front door, giggling like school kids. The tunnel vanishes behind us.

I take a moment to catch my breath and stretch my arms and legs. My muscles feel taut, my neck tight. "That Irma is quite the schoolmistress."

"That she is. You stiff?"

"I don't mean to sound all weak and mortal, but is this tour going to require a lot of walking? Because I am already exhausted."

Hades smiles. "We don't have to walk anywhere," he says, "although you may object to my preferred method of transport."

I purse my lips. "Go on."

Hades flexes his arms, rolling back his shoulders, and two magnificent crow-black wings emerge from his back. The feathers are gleaming and dusted ever-so-slightly with gold.

"You have wings."

I can tell he's struggling to contain his smirk at the sound of sheer and utter wonder in my voice. "I can shape shift. A few of the High Court can. I have a range of forms, but this is the easiest."

"That is… incredibly cool."

I reach forward to touch one of the feathers. They are smooth as satin. I trace upwards towards his shoulder blades, where they connect with his flesh underneath his doublet. He trembles slightly beneath me.

"You can feel that?"

"They are *my wings*."

"Sorry, I just… I figured if you could summon them, they were more like an illusion."

"I assure you, they are not."

"I must say, the feathers are a surprise. I kind of imagined, if you had wings, they'd be bat ones."

His eyes narrow. "Why, pray tell, if I have wings, should they be *bat* ones?"

"Because you're Hades. Lord of the Underworld. I can just see you hanging upside down shrieking, 'I am the night!' with an iddy-biddy bat face."

"You are… odd."

"I'm delightful! You might be too, with bat wings."

The smallest of smirks twitches in his cheeks. It moves something inside me, halfway to uncomfortable and halfway to something very, very different, but as soft and dark as the gleam of his feathers.

"So… you can shapeshift into anything?"

"Pretty much."

"Could you grow a tail?"

"Why would I want to grow a tail?"

"No reason. Just be funny if you had a tail which twitched when you were nervous, or wagged when you were happy—"

"I am never either of those things. A tail would be ridiculous."

"And cute."

He smiles again, like the smile from earlier, half-bashful. It is very strange seeing him this way. "What have you been reading?"

"You don't want to know."

"Oh, I really think I do."

I suppose there's no harm in telling him, although I'm a little bit embarrassed. "So faerie smut is a really popular mortal genre right now."

Something wicked glimmers in his eyes. "And what do these wings and tails *do* in your stories?"

My mouth goes dry. "All sorts of things."

"Oh?" He takes a step closer. "Please be more specific."

The quiet rumble of his *please* sends silent shivers through me. I step back. "You aren't ready for it."

He sighs. "What's the appeal of extra appendages anyway?"

I snort, but I'm not sure the answer is actually that filthy. "I think… I think if you like someone—and I like faerie smut with good characters, so they always do—it's exciting and interesting that there's this other, different, fascinating part of them. Like, the sex barely comes into it. It's just another thing to get to know."

Hades grins. He flaps his wings, holding them up over our heads like a canopy. "Fascinating and exciting, am I?" The look in his eyes is liquid sin. It rumbles in the pit of my stomach. "And the sex *barely* comes into it? But it is there?"

The tips of his great wings brush my cheeks. If he summons a tail out of somewhere, I'll lose it.

"It… it might be there," I whisper, hardly sure whether or not I'm talking about the books anymore.

"I think I'd like to read this smut of yours."

"I'm not sure it's your thing."

"Faeries and smut? It could be my autobiography."

"Oh… shut up." I say, glancing away. I try to focus on something else, ignoring the pounding of my heart, the sudden dryness in my mouth. "Are you taking me on this tour, or what?"

"Oh, absolutely," he says, dropping his wings. He holds out his arms. "I'm going to have to swoop you up now. Are you ready for it?"

"Why would I need to be—"

He lifts me into his arms, and I grip hold of his shoulders, swallowing my gasp. No one has ever been able to sweep me off my feet before, not since I was a child anyway, and not if I discount Libby tossing me over her shoulder to demonstrate her strength. The downsides of being so tall.

For a mortal girl, anyway. Average for a faerie. An easy weight for the Lord of Night.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

"Yup." *No.*

"Hold on tight."

I let out a faint squeak as he kicks off from the ground, his huge, pounding wings lifting us into the air. My entire body stiffens like clay in a kiln, and I shut my eyes tight, burying my face in his neck. Despite the force of the wind, his scent rises through me; apple spice and woodsmoke.

I feel his smile on my cheek. "You're missing everything."

"Missing the very long drop to the sheer stone below? I'm good, thanks."

"Open your eyes, Sephy."

Slowly, as if I can banish the distance between myself and the ground if I can't see it, I pry open my eyes.

We are inside a huge cavern alight with crystal, blue and green and wondrous. Plants cling to the side of the rock, and I feel like I've been submerged in water. I'm floating at the bottom of the ocean. It's so beautiful I almost want to reach out to touch the ripples of light the water casts on the

walls.

Hades keeps flying. We weave through other rocky halls in other colours, ones studded with jewels, glimmering purples and reds, others the shiny, shimmering black of his hallowed halls. Every turn offers a new wonder I never could have dreamed of.

We stop in one to admire the painted walls and golden statues, and a perfectly crafted mosaic floor.

"Glamour?" I frown. It seems too real to be such. There's tiny clinks and flakes in the pottery and paint, signs of having been made by hand.

Hades shakes his head. "One of my predecessors was quite the artist."

"Which one?"

"I'm not sure."

"How many have there been?"

"Thirteen, including the original, and myself."

"That's quite the high turnover, given how long you're all supposed to live."

He shrugs. "A lot of them retire, hand the fiery crown to someone else. Or, you know, someone kills them."

"Why murder someone for the role, if people are so keen to leave it?"

Hades eyes darken. "Power. It's easy to think you want it when you don't have it." He summons a ball of bright blue flame, and stares at it intently as it dances around his long, tapered fingers.

"And you?"

"What of me?"

"Did you want power? Do you like having it now?"

His flames brighten. "I just wanted not to be powerless," he says, and for a moment I think of the little boy in the white throne room, cowering under Ares' glare. "And now, I never want to be powerless again. And for all that you might see good in me, I would do almost anything to keep it."

I swallow, trying not to think of that faerie woman. "*Almost* anything."

"Yes, almost anything. I have some morals, at least."

I think about asking for what, but I don't. I'm too afraid of what his answer will be. I'm afraid of liking him less.

I'm afraid of liking him more, too.

I turn back to the art. "Mosaics aren't very Greek," I remark.

"That's because we're *not* Greek, not anymore. We—or our ancestors, at least—travelled all over the place, inspiring legend after legend, before becoming rather intrinsically tied to pagan mythology. We keep the names, or part of them, as a reference to our heritage, but everything else tends to be a bit more celtic."

"Like Samhain," I say.

"Blood sacrifices and all." He grimaces. "Come, I've other places to show you."

A while later, we stop in another cavern. It's been carved into something resembling a temple, with colossal pillars of roots and a domed, painted ceiling. It's a perfect circle, and something gold and intricate runs through the stone floor, shining with light.

"The transportation ring," he says. "Or the main one, at least. This place is an absolute labyrinth and those goblins are always finding ways of sneaking in."

"Maybe you should employ more than skeleton warriors to guard your halls…"

He glares at me. "I can't trust anyone else."

It seems like a sore point, so I decide to drop it. I'd probably have trust issues if a friend forced

me to kill my father so that I could rule the Underworld.

I'd probably still bring Libby with me, though.

Hades takes a folded letter from his pocket and drops it into a podium and the centre of the circle. It fizzles in the flame and disappears. "Post-box," he says.

"You can summon things down here, but you can't send them?"

"That is correct."

"Seems strange."

"I think it's another way of reminding the reigning Hades who's really in control."

I sigh. "You know, I always had a bit of a soft spot for Hades in the old myths."

He blinks incredulously. "You did?"

"He causes the least—*and I mean the least*—amount of trouble of any of the Gods, was the most faithful to his wife, did nothing to deserve being banished to the underworld, and is constantly the villain in just about every Greek retelling. It really isn't fair."

"You're very passionate about this."

"You should meet my father," I breathe. "He's literally written books on the subject. You know who's really a villain?"

"Zeus?" Hades offers. "Hera? Zera. Definitely Zera."

"Pretty much all of the others. Those too, definitely. But the trouble Aphrodite causes! And Athena—don't get me started on Athena."

"But—"

"She cursed a woman for being raped. *Raped*. Not cool, Athena, not cool. And Poseidon? Actual rapist. Instant villain. Hades didn't stand for any of that!"

"You seem to have a lot of opinions about this."

"I'm sorry." I take a moment to inhale and exhale carefully. "I don't get a lot of opportunities to talk to people my age about this."

Hades raises an eyebrow. "You're forgetting how old I really am."

"No, I'm not. Irma said you were about the same age as me, or the equivalent."

"Irma…" He groans. "Can't keep her mouth shut, that woman."

"There was plenty she didn't say," I add. "Why did you want me to think you were super old?"

"I don't know. I thought it might make me seem more dashing and mysterious."

I sigh, half-laughing. "Irma said that no one in the High Court behaves like themselves."

"I don't know. Aphron—umm, that's Aphrodite—seems very at ease with themselves, and Dione—Dionysis as was—is happy as long as there's a party. I don't think she's got much to hide at all."

"But you do?"

He sighs. "It's more what I have to protect," he says, and holds out his hand. "Come with me."

The next flight is long, and I feel like we're descending, down, down into the belly of the Underworld, lower even than the Gate.

We stop in a cavern the opposite of the one with the golden circle, a dark place of shadow, smooth and hollow. A dozen skeleton sentries sit around the sides, and a monstrous dog guards the gates, its black fur gleaming. Hades takes three dog treats out of his pocket, flinging one up to each mouth. Their teeth are the size of my forearms.

"What is this place?" I ask, as a chill runs through me. It is like a graveyard, but also… not a graveyard. Another circle sits at the centre, pulsing with faint, purplish energy.

"You are familiar with the story of Kronos, I take it?"

"The titan," I tell him. "Father of most of the great Greek Gods. Ate his kids. None of them were particularly happy about that."

He does not laugh. "The titans were divine beings. I'm still not sure if they could be called gods, but no mortal weapon could kill them. They were invincible. All powerful. When Zeus rose up against his father Kronos, he could not defeat him. So he and the rest of his court imprisoned them here, in the deepest pit of Tartarus."

"But… what has that to do with you?"

He touches his chest. "I'm the only one that can open it. I don't know when or why that was decided. Perhaps it's as you say; Hades was the least troublesome. But it is binding. Even Zera cannot break it. Only Hades can open the gate to Tartarus."

"But… why would anyone *want* to free a bunch of supremely powerful god-like beings?"

"Not everyone is happy with how docile the fae have become," he explains. "Many would revel in the chance to have the world returned to what it was, to have mortals cower before us."

I take a deep breath. "The Unseelie Court."

He nods. "And not just them, either. There's many a member of the Seelie Court who would enjoy a bit of chaos."

"Like Ares," I say. "Your brother."

Hades winces. "Yes."

I'm starting to understand why Emetria wanted Hades to rule instead, why she might have forced it on him, thinking his father was dying and the next choice could have dire consequences.

I'm still not sure I can forgive her, though.

"Well, that's incredibly cheery," I say, as brightly as I can manage. "Show me something else pretty before we leave, and then let's go back."

For a second there, I thought about calling it *home*. I think Hades noticed it too, the slight pause before I spoke, but he says nothing of it, lifting me once more into his arms. He takes me back to the cavern we visited the day before, now stung with light. I almost scramble out of his arms to rush into the centre of it, bathing my pale arms in the watery sunlight. I can hardly feel the warmth beneath the bubbled bridge between worlds, but it doesn't matter. I think I let out a moan.

"I'm coming back every day," I murmur, eyes closed.

Hades doesn't laugh. "It's not safe."

"I'm exaggerating, I know." I sigh, breathing in the whisper of a scent, like warm, damp earth. An iota of scent has dribbled through the barrier. "Can you smell that?"

"I can."

"Petrichor. The smell of warm earth after rainfall. It's my favourite fragrance in the entire world. Even the sound of it is beautiful. *Petrichor, petrichor*. It sounds like something magic. That probably doesn't mean much to you, but every time I catch a whiff of it I swear I…" I open my eyes, aware of how much I'm talking, how quiet and still he is. He's keeping a look-out, no doubt, although his eyes seem rooted on me. "Sorry, I'm babbling."

"It's delightful."

"It's embarrassing!"

"I think it's sweet, when people babble. It's like holding out a part of yourself, beckoning others to join, like making a treat of your person. And with bigger stuff, it's like offering a sliver of your soul, and trusting the other person not to break it."

I stare at him, amazed by his words. "Have you ever done that?" I ask him. "Offered up a piece of yourself?"

“Yes,” he says, his word slow. He avoids my gaze entirely.

“What… what happened?”

“Nothing,” he says.

“Nothing? How can nothing be the answer?”

“How indeed,” he says.

How could he have offered up his soul and not been crushed? How could someone have taken it without realising? How could he be broken and not broken, all at the same time?

“She was a fool,” I say, “for not seeing what you were. It… it was a she, right?”

He smiles. “Yes, a she. But she was no fool.”

“But—”

“It does not matter, Sephy. Not now.” He crosses the chamber, lifting my knuckles to his lips and kissing them, and I blush down to my bones.

Irma berates me for sneaking away from her lessons, but Hades yells at her right back, insisting she needs to make allowances for my mortal form, and refuses her demands for any more practise tonight. He has a bath made up in the big bathroom, the one the size of a small swimming pool.

"I can run my own bath," I tell him.

"Of course you can," he says, "but I rather thought… never mind."

He summons me bath bombs, chocolates, and a fruity, non-alcoholic drink with an umbrella in. It's stupidly thoughtful, especially since he does it from outside the room. He doesn't even get the benefit of my grateful face or making lewd comments about my state of undress, and I almost hug him when the bath is over. Every part of me feels wondrously light.

We take dinner with Irma, but we don't say very much to one another.

All three of us slip quietly away to our chambers. I read in bed with Pandora, and the carved roses in the posts of my bed shift and bloom. Hades' magic? Must be.

There's a soft knock on the door.

"'Sephone?"

"Hmm?"

"If you're still awake, I wondered if you fancied a spot of star-gazing?"

I cross the room, opening the door with a frown. "Star-gazing?"

"The observatory," he says. "Safer than the moongate. But only if you want to."

You don't get much of a chance to star-gaze in the city. The only times I've ever done it was when I was on holiday. Dad took me to Crete one summer when I was about thirteen. We lay on the roof terrace of our holiday villa, and he pointed out constellations and told me stories about them.

I stare at Hades, in his loose t-shirt and lightning-bolt pyjama bottoms, picking at his painted black nails almost nervously.

"I'd love to."

He smiles, holding his hand out in the right direction. We tip-toe past Irma's room and into the chamber.

The ceiling is shimmering with starlight, all gold and white, glassy and glistening. The inky blue-black sky whirls with pitch and purple, deep scarlet, a blooming kaleidoscope of night. Who knew the night had so many shades?

"An illusion," he reminds me, "but you can find sights like this somewhere in the world."

"I want to see them for real," I say, although I cannot fathom why this wouldn't be enough.

"I'd like to take you," he says, his voice slightly breathless. Then he coughs, pointing to the cushions laid out on the floor. We sit down, a few inches apart, and I lie back to capture as much as I can.

"This is lovely," I whisper.

"It is." He turns to face me. "Tell me what you miss of the mortal world. Don't tell me about the big things, like the people. Tell me little things, the tiny sensations you take for granted."

I think for a moment, mostly of weather, although my enchanted ceiling is helping a lot with the

absence of sun, as well as our little expedition today. "I miss… the way the rain would fall against my window in the night, how the lamplight from the street made it glitter like starlight. I miss the smell of coffee in the coffee shop at the end of the street, and the sound of inane chatter. I miss cuddling up in my fluffy duvet on weekend mornings, and sheltering in the bandstand at Hyde Park during rainstorms."

He pauses for a moment, looking at me intently. "Did that happen often? Sheltering in the bandstand?"

"Just the once, I think."

"Why such a fond memory, then?"

"I don't know. Something about the scent of damp earth and the glint of sunlight through a cloudy sky."

"Sounds beautiful."

"It was."

I turn to face him, folding an arm underneath my head. It cuts out the view of the stars, but I don't mind so much. "If you could be anywhere in the world right now, where would you be?"

Hades pauses. "I am not sure I can answer without scaring you."

I knit my brows. "Well, now you *have* to tell me."

"No where," he says. "Somehow, I find that this, at the moment, is exactly where I want to be."

Something pulses through me, some strange, weighty sensation, like fear and desire turned liquid. I roll onto my back, avoiding his gaze.

"I've alarmed you."

"No, you haven't."

I'm not alarmed by his words, although the utter truth of them surprises me. I'm more alarmed by my own thoughts, by the realisation that, at least for now, there's nowhere else I'd like to be, either.

And no one else I want to be with.

But only in this moment.

"Tell me something about you," I ask, to drown out the questions inside me.

"Be more specific."

"What do you like about Harry Potter?"

He pauses for a moment. "I'm afraid my answer will make me sound pathetic."

"I doubt that," I tell him. "It is not one of the many words I would ever associate with you."

He inhales, and I can see him biting back the desire to ask what other words I'd call him. "I had everything in the way of material goods growing up. Everything I could ask for was given to me. And yet I still felt like I too was a boy trapped under the stairs, waiting for someone to come and rescue me."

I wonder what could have made him feel that way, and if he'd answer me if I asked. I wonder if Emetria was the one supposed to rescue him. I'm just trying to find the words to ask when he speaks instead, swiftly, as if to cover up the brewing questions, or the wound he's exposed to me.

"What's your favourite book?"

"Um, Peter Pan, I think. Mostly for the nostalgia. Dad used to read it to me a lot as a kid." I leave out the story about my copy, and the words I hoped my mother had written. "I used to dream some magic flying boy would fall into my room and take me away to Neverland." I look across at him. "You aren't quite what I imagined."

He laughs at this, one of his rare, true, warm laughs, the kind that makes me want to inch close

to him. He holds out one of his hands, and the stars above us swirl, two close together growing brighter than ever.

"There you go, Wendy," he says. "Second star to the right, and straight on till morning."

I'm too busy admiring his crisp profile and the soft smile on his lips to pay much attention to the stars. I think I could stay right *here* until morning. I search for something else to ask him.

"What's your name?" I settle on. "You wouldn't tell me before—why not?"

"Faeries are notoriously secretive about their names. Knowing someone's *true* name can compel you to bend to their will."

"But your mother couldn't have called you Hades. You didn't occupy the role until later."

"No, she never much called me anything."

I swallow, not sure what to say to that.

"Luliver," he answers, so quietly I almost miss it. "That's the name I used before. It's not my true name. But it is mine."

"Luliver," I repeat, the name rolling off my tongue like a caress. "I like it. Like a soft version of *Lucifer.* It's pretty."

He snorts.

"Should I still call you Hades?"

"When it's just the two of us, you can call me whatever you wish."

I smile, and think about rolling into the crook of his arm, or taking his hand, or something. I don't. I can't. I'm far too nervous.

"I like that you call me 'Sephone," I say instead. "No one else calls me that, and I like the way it sounds. But I like it when you call me Sephy, too." I place my hands above my head, and wind my fingers through my curls, partly to stop myself from wanting to run my hands through his hair instead. "First kiss." I say.

"What?"

"Tell me about your first kiss."

He shakes his head. "It isn't a fun tale. But I would like to hear yours."

"It was at Libby's fourteenth birthday party. A friend of ours named David. We both stepped outside to get some air, and it was a bit cold, so we cuddled up together and the next thing I knew, we were kissing."

"That sounds nice." He sighs, his voice almost wistful. "Did you date him?"

I shake my head. "I think we both kind of forgot about it by the time Monday rolled around, and decided we were better off friends."

"I sincerely doubt anyone would forget kissing *you.*

My cheeks buzz. "Well, it wasn't important, you know? It was just a fun thing to do at the time."

"Have you ever been in love?" he asks.

"No. I had a boyfriend, Jack, for a while. He was very nice, but it wasn't serious. I'm not sure I really *want* to date. Everyone seems to do it just because everyone else is doing it. I'd much rather be with someone because I wanted to be with *them,* you know? Not just because I didn't want to be alone or thought that I should."

His eyes search the stars, glistening. "Yes," he says. "I do know."

I'm not sure I'm ready to ask him about romance, given his reaction to the first kiss question.

"What do you want?" he asks, before I can fill the spreading silence. "*Really* want. The big thing in life. It's OK to say you don't know, too."

I wonder if he knows what his own answer is, if it's as simple as not being powerless, like he

told me before.

"I just want to know what I want," I tell him. "To know myself better. Fully, even. I want to have direction, meaning. And I'd like to stop worrying about things."

He frowns, turning to me. "Worrying about things? What kind of things?"

"*Dumb* things," I return. "Being late to school. Forgetting my homework. Disappointing Dad. I barely even left my flat before this, you know? I was so afraid of something bad happening."

He blinks. "You willingly wandered into the literal Underworld."

"Yeah… I did that. I think this whole thing kinda made me feel like the worst had already happened, that being afraid was a bit pointless at this stage."

Hades looks at me, and it takes me a moment to realise what I've just said.

"*You're* not the worst thing!" I add hurriedly. "The whole near-murder thing, that sucked. And not being able to see my friends and family isn't great. But you don't suck. At all."

A slight smile plays in the corner of his mouth. "You say the sweetest things."

I still feel guilty. "You're actually the best thing about this whole misadventure," I tell him, fighting my rising blush.

"I am?" He cocks his head thoughtfully. "How so?"

"You must know I enjoy talking to you."

"I did not know," he says. "Until now."

The intensity of his gaze is alarming, and I half-want to bolt. The other half of me feels like an insect, drawn towards the brightness of it, of *him*.

I shake it away. I am no moth. "If you could have any skill in the world, what would you have?" I try instead. "Not magic powers, *skills*. The sort you could maybe learn, or a talent that you'd like an aptitude for."

"Hmm, good question." He holds out his hands. "I think I'd like to play the piano. Long fingers, see. Reckon they'd look good tickling the ivories."

I reckon *he'd* look good doing that.

"I imagine I'll learn at some point. I'm going to live forever, after all." He sounds sad about that. "You?"

"I'd like to master everything I'm already good at. I want to learn how to draw, *really* draw. And to knit and crochet perfectly. And bake. I want to bake things that look great, not just things that taste good. And I want to grow a perfect garden. I should probably just pick one to master but I can't. I want to do it all."

He smiles, but there's a sadness there. Perhaps he knows, like I do, that I may not have time in my short, mortal life. But damn, if I don't plan on trying.

"I'll send you some gardening supplies tomorrow," he says. "You can do whatever you like in the garden."

I've been meaning to ask this for a while, and I'm stunned he beat me to it. "Thank you," I whisper.

"You're welcome."

A few more minutes drift by in pleasant silence. The stars slowly swirl around us.

"What about superpowers?" he asks. "You've talked about ordinary talents, but what about supernatural ones? If you could have any power, what would you have?"

I think for a moment. When I was younger, I wanted to fly, thinking that the world would open to me if I could, that I could go anywhere. Then I realised the impracticalities of this gift, that I'd be caught in an instant, and, not to mention, it was a pretty selfish gift. I wouldn't even make much of a

superhero unless I combined it with strength; I wasn't strong or brave enough to haul people out of burning buildings.

"I'd like the power to fix anything," I tell him. "Anything broken. A scraped knee or a gushing wound. A torn doll or a broken heart." I look across at him. His mouth is parted, his eyes wide. "It's silly, isn't it? I've never told anyone that, not even Libby. It's way more impossible than flying… which is apparently possible."

"It isn't silly," he says, "but why? Why that power?"

"I don't like seeing people in pain."

"Of course you don't." He looks away for a moment. "Have you ever hurt anyone?"

I freeze for a second. "I mean, I've shoved a few bullies in the playground and I once accidentally punched Libby in the nose and this one time I stepped on Pandora's tail and I felt *awful* __"

"I don't mean like that."

"I know you didn't." I sigh, shifting into a sitting position and hugging my legs. I can hardly expect him to tell me the big things if I don't share either. "My father started seeing a woman when I was about ten. Alice. I don't know if he'd dated before and not told me, but this one I knew about. We went out together. She was nice, kind. Good to me. Then one day my father took me out to lunch and told me he was thinking about asking her to marry him. And I just… I froze. I freaked out. I didn't want her to move in with us. I didn't want anything to change. I *liked* it being just Dad and me, and… and like most kids that grow up without a parent, I was still waiting for my mother to sweep back into our lives and I just couldn't stand the idea of there not being a place for her. So I sobbed and begged my father not to do it."

"And he didn't."

I hang my head. "They broke up not long afterwards. He tried to pretend that it wasn't working, but I knew. And… I don't think he's dated since. I think she might have been it for him, and I ruined it."

"If that's the one bad thing you've ever done in your life, I think you're doing OK."

"I'm not sure that makes it any better for my Dad."

"He's still got you."

The thought makes tears prickle in my eyes. "I am a terrible daughter, and a horrible person."

A hand touches my shoulder. "You had one bad moment, as a child. You shouldn't have to be ashamed of that forever."

I brush away my tears with the back of my hand. "Maybe just a few more years."

In all honesty, I'll probably feel bad about that until Dad finally starts seeing someone else and I know, for certain, that he's happy. The last couple of years I've tried to suggest it, but he shrugs it off and says he's happy as he is. He has the same attitude as me; that you should be with someone because you like *them,* and not just the thought of being with someone.

He must have liked Alice a lot.

And my mother.

"Hot chocolate," Hades declares.

"What?"

"Hot chocolate. In the kitchen. Then bed. It's getting awfully late."

He pulls me to my feet, squeezing my hand. He does not let go.

The next morning we have breakfast with Irma. It's a bit hard to talk in front of her, but I know I *want* to talk, so I find excuses to linger in the kitchen after I've finished eating, bringing in Pandora under the guise of feeding her. The dogs bark, but even Fluffy shuts up after a few hisses and swipes.

"Are we *sure* that's a cat?" asks Irma. "Not a sphynx in disguise? Maybe a small, misshapen manticore?"

"Sphynxes are benign," says Hades over the rim of his mug.

"Not the ones I've met." She finishes shovelling food into her mouth. "Right, I'm going to start prepping the throne room. Don't go anywhere for a bit."

"Yes ma'am," says Hades, but he catches my eye. He waits until Irma departs. "Favourite animal?" he asks. "Wait, no, you don't need to answer that, it's a cat, isn't it?"

I pick Pandora off the counter where she's licking a fresh saucer of cat milk, and snuggle her close to my chest. "Whatever gave you that idea?"

"Lucky guess."

"I also like horses and dolphins and duck-billed platypus."

"Of course you do… wait, platypus?"

"They're just so cute and funny-looking!"

He shakes his head, but he's smiling.

"Earliest memory?" I ask.

He tenses. "Hiding from my mother," he says quietly. "Can I share my happiest early memory instead?"

"Sure." I'm eager to move away from the darkness of his previous answer, despite the chasms it's opened inside me.

"My first visit to the mortal world. I went to a park. Saw real grass and played with mortal kids."

I can hardly imagine him as a child, all dark and scowly, running after regular kids in such an ordinary, benign place.

"And how did you find us mere mortals?"

"Lovely," he breathes. "I became somewhat infatuated."

"With us or our world?"

"Both."

I smile. "All right, Ariel—what about an embarrassing story?"

He takes a sip of his coffee. "When I first tried to fly I fell into the River Styx. I couldn't work out how to make the wings disappear, so I was just flapping and flailing and sinking, and I was completely sure I was going to be the first Hades in history to drown. The Ferryman fished me out. It was beyond embarrassing. You?"

"I once walked into a French window."

"Was it very clean?"

"Not as clean as I would have liked. I nearly knocked myself out. Libby was wetting herself."

"Do friends laugh at each other's misfortunes?"

"Oh, sometimes. When they deserve it." I laugh at the memory. "Any weird fears or phobias? Not the serious stuff. It is breakfast after all."

He snorts. "Tell no one, but I'm not a huge fan of spiders. I know, I know. Lord of Night. Big scary tough guy."

"You are like, one of those things."

"Which one?"

"A guy."

He spits out his coffee, pursing his lips to hold in a smile. "I can be tough. I can be scary. I'm tall, too. Not my fault you are as well."

"I am disappointed you didn't make a crude 'big' joke there."

"Are you really?"

"No, not remotely."

There's a cough from the door. We look up sharply. Irma is standing in the doorway. "Much as I hate to interrupt the two of you mooning about like a couple of love-struck teenagers—"

Hades looks affronted. "I could be a love-struck teenager! You don't know!"

"I know you're thirty-two," she snaps.

Hades blushes.

"I need some summoning done, when you're ready, oh Fearsome Lord of Night."

Hades pouts, mumbling something about being fearsome under his breath.

"What was that, young man?"

"Nothing, ma'am."

I follow the two of them out of the room. "You're only thirty-two?" I grin.

Hades scratches the back of his neck. "That's the equivalent of eighteen in human years."

"Practically a child."

"Oh, shut up. I have the entire High Court looking down on me for my inexperience. I don't need it from you, too."

"As you wish, boy."

He elbows me in the side. "I could learn to dislike you."

"Could you? Could you *really?"*

"It's possible. It would take a lot of time and you would have to do a lot worse than that, but it could happen." He pauses. "It's doubtful, though. I think I would forgive you anything."

Before I can think of anything to say to this, Irma barks at Hades to summon a series of tables which she levitates into the perfect position with her own magic. Huge boxes and crates of decorations come next, which whiz around the room, attaching themselves to ceilings and pillars. The darkness of the room begins to abate, stuffed with starlight. The process has barely begun and I'm already enamoured.

"You, mortal girl, stop gaping. You need to act like this is normal."

"Her name is Persephone," says Hades defensively.

Irma rolls her fiery eyes. "You two realise the irony of that, right?"

"Yes," we say, at the exact same time. We both smirk, trying not to look at one another.

Irma groans. "You, young lord, your services are no longer required. Go out on patrol—"

"But—"

"There's nothing for you to do here, and Mistress Persphone needs a few more lessons."

"Hmm, *Mistress* Persephone. I do like that. *Lady* Persephone works well too—"

"Out!"

"I'm going!"

He clicks on his standard black ensemble, winks at me, and disappears down the hall with his hands stuffed in his pockets. I don't quite manage to hold in my smile.

"Stop grinning at him," Irma snaps. "It won't end well."

"What won't end well?"

"You know exactly what I mean."

"I can't… we can't like, *date* each other," I tell her, the word seeming ludicrous on my tongue. "Even if I was that way inclined, which I'm not. He's a faerie, I'm a mortal. I can't stay here forever. I don't *want* to stay here forever."

"A lot can happen in five months," she grumbles. "But you'd be wise to remember your previous statement. You are quite literally from different worlds."

"I know," I tell her, because I absolutely haven't forgotten.

"Good. We'll pick up where we left out yesterday, shall we?"

Most of Irma's instruction today revolves around her forcing me to dance and then yelling at me or dropping loud objects in the room to see how I'll react.

"You're allowed to turn your head towards the noise, but don't look surprised. Everything, no matter how weird or shocking, is perfectly normal to you, understood?"

Her distractions get louder, more colourful, and more elaborate. At one point, she bursts into flames in front of me. These aren't like Hades' flames, a painted illusion, but raw, blistering fire. I take a small step back at those.

"Small step back is allowed," Irma says. "Panic is not."

"I'm not panicking." Although it seems ludicrous that people bursting into flame now feels normal to me.

"No, you're not, are you? Oddly calm."

It's the closest I get to a compliment.

For the days leading up to the Solstice, we all three exist in a particular pattern of meals, training, warm baths and lazy evenings. A few times, Hades comes to sneak me away at lunch, and he takes me to visit other unseen wonders in the Underworld. He flies me to caverns of art, secret pockets of gardens and tiny glistening rock pools, and the Gate, the great golden pool where all souls must pass.

"What do you think happens after they fall?" I ask him, watching the spirits vanish into golden light, the wailing replaced by a thin, soft hum.

"I have thought about it often, and never found an answer," he replies. "But peace, I hope."

"Not justice?"

He shrugs. "Fae come down here, you know, searching for their departed in the stream. I'd like to be able to tell them they're in a better place, or another such beautiful mortal lie."

"That must be hard. Does it happen often?"

"Rarely, thankfully, given our lifespan, but… You might think people would be more reasonable when their dear departed had centuries, but it's worse. Mortals talk of days and months and years, but

they want decades and centuries and millennia. We are never truly ready for what lies beyond. We are never ready to lose that which we love."

I cannot think what to say to this. "Let's go somewhere else," I request. "Anywhere beautiful."

A smile glimmers in the corner of his mouth. "My view is quite—"

"Don't," I warn. "Show *me* something pretty."

"Is my face not to your liking?"

I bite my lip, his eyes soft on mine. I want to stare into those eyes, to examine that intense colour, each spark and fleck of gold and honey, but I don't want to be *caught* staring, which proves problematic, as he is always looking at me whenever I glance his way.

"A pretty cavern," I insist, "now."

"As you wish." He unfurls his wings around us and we launch into the sky.

I only realise how much I miss our lunch-time expeditions when he doesn't come, the day before the Solstice, instead tumbling in late one evening after Irma and I have already eaten.

"You look stressed," I tell him, after plying him with food.

He yawns into his goblet, running a hand through his thick hair. "Spent most of the day doubling our forces and lighting the way from the transportation circle. No doubt Irma will tell me it doesn't look right tomorrow."

I know he needs to expend energy to create the skeleton guards, and that doubling them could be no easy feat. "You must be exhausted."

He lays his head against the cool wood of the table. "Just a bit."

"Be right back," I tell him.

I run into the bathroom and turn on the taps, hunting for the jar of glittering, golden liquid that smells like honey. I pour a generous amount into the building waters and rush back to the kitchen. "I'm running you a bath," I tell him. "Don't waste any more energy summoning anything, I'll get it for you."

Hades blinks at me, his cheek still pressed against the surface of the table. He shifts upright. "'Sephone, that's… thank you."

He acts like no one has ever done something like this for him before. "You'd do the same for me. You *have* done the same for me."

"Yes, but—"

"But?"

He opens his mouth, and I think he means to say 'nothing', but that would be a lie. "Never mind," he says instead. An instruction. No lie there.

I pour him another glass and take it into the bathroom, together with fresh towels, a reading book, and a handful of the chocolate truffles I made in some of the downtime Irma allowed me earlier in the week. When the bath is full, I tug him along.

"Make any jokes about me undressing you, and I will never do this again, I swear."

He smirks. "Wouldn't dream of it."

"How is that not a lie?"

"We can usually get away with metaphor, when there's no attempt to deceive. Plus, I can confirm that I have never dreamed of making *jokes* about you undressing me. You actually undressing

me, however…"

I punch his shoulder. "I will knock you in."

"How is that a punishment?"

Annoyed with his smile, I do just that, only he clearly wasn't actually expecting me to go through with it so he grabs my wrist out of instinct and we both plunge into the soapy water, coughing and spluttering to the surface. The bubbles cling to Hades' hair and chin, dispelling any fraction of elegance or power. He's no more terrifying than a puppy, especially when he throws back his head and howls with laughter.

I'm laughing too. I can't help it.

Hades comes forward, wiping the bubbles from my face. "Sorry," he says, "I wasn't expecting you to—"

I blow a cluster of bubbles from his nose. "Word of advice; I don't make empty threats."

"Duly noted." He smooths back a lock of damp hair. "You're all wet."

"I am."

"You might as well join me now." He peels off his shirt, dropping it by the side of the bath.

"I am not—put your shirt back on!"

"But I'm in the bath…"

I haul myself out, my nightdress clinging to every curve. I'm incredibly aware of how close to naked I am, aware of other things too, things that never mattered before, like my mortal curves and body hair. I grab the towel I'd set aside for him.

"Bye, Hades!"

"That's my towel…"

I fling it back in his face as I leave, almost walking straight into Irma in the hall. She gives me a cursory, disapproving glance, but says nothing as I slide away to my room.

I change out of my sopping nightgown and into a dry one, wringing out my hair, toweling it dry, and weaving it into a loose plait. I lie back against the crisp sheets and count the petals of the wooden roses on my bed posts. I cannot sleep. I'm too nervous about the Solstice, too worried about slipping up. Maybe it would be better to be glamoured away. Better, and easier. Hades would protect me. He'd let me know what happened.

But I do not want to be defenseless, to surrender my only power. I have to persevere. I have to.

I hear Hades leave the bathroom and shuffle along the corridor. I doubt he'll sleep easily, either. Honestly, it seems silly to even try.

I toss and turn a little longer before giving up, pulling on my dressing gown, and tip-toeing along to his room.

He answers quickly, his damp hair still plastered to his head, his loose clothes sticking slightly to his body. I can almost count the muscles on his chest. The summery scent of the bathwater still clings to his skin, merging with the peppermint aroma of toothpaste.

"'Sephone," he says, as if he's surprised to see me. "What are you—"

"Are you worried about the Solstice?" I ask him.

He nods. "Yes."

"Can't sleep?"

"Yes."

"Me neither. Want to watch something together and temporarily forget our troubles?"

"Absolutely."

I grab him by the hand and drag him along to the mirror chamber, where I stare at the small, hard chaise. We'll be practically sitting on each other's laps.

"No," I say.

"No?"

"Summon a fluffy sofa."

"A fluffy sofa?"

"Yeah, a big, fluffy, cuddly sofa!"

A massive sofa materialises in the middle of the room. It looks like it's been shorn from a cartoon monster. It's bright blue and *hairy*.

"That sofa is… actually fluffy."

"You did ask!"

"I meant like… soft and squishy! I didn't even know they *made* fluffy sofas. This is… the ugliest sofa I've ever seen."

"Then why didn't you—"

"Nope. Something soft and squishy, please."

He sighs, summoning another big grey sofa that looks so soft I could drown in it. I sit down to test it. Perfection.

"Does it meet the lady's approval?"

"You know what? It does. Blankets and cushions now, please."

"Why do you need cushions when it's already squishy?"

"Just do it."

He summons a pile of them, and I snatch one up, pulling him down beside me and shoving one into his lap.

"What's it for?"

"Cuddling."

He raises an eyebrow. "The Lord of the Underworld does not cuddle."

I blink at him. "That's a lie, surely?"

He shrugs. "I have been somewhat lacking in opportunities."

I think about throwing myself at him, partly as a joke, but also partly because I think everyone *needs* to have a few cuddles now and then, silly and childish as that sounds. But I don't, because I'm not sure when I'd stop. I don't want to make things awkward. "Just… cuddle the pillow."

He sighs, leaning back. "OK, the sofa is nice, I grant you."

"Told you. Mirror, play the latest live action Disney film. Hades, summon popcorn."

"Yes, my lady."

Hades 'I don't cuddle' is clutching his pillow forty minutes in and doesn't let go until the end. He eats popcorn numbly, eyes fixed to the screen, occasionally gasping or laughing.

I think I watch him more often than the film.

Somehow, our legs tangle together, and I lie down against the armrest, in a perfect warm bubble of bliss. I feel peaceful, with no desire to move even as the credits roll and the mirror fades to black.

"That was delightful," says Hades. "The visuals, the music, the humour… I loved it. Sephy?"

"Hmm?"

"You all right?"

"Tired."

"You look like you're ready to fall asleep."

"I am."

"Should we go to bed?"

"Just a few more minutes… so comfy."

Hades leans across and strokes my face. "'Sephone?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For all sorts of things, but especially for tonight."

"Any time."

He sighs. "Sometimes, I wish you were a faerie, and I could hold you to that."

"I wish I was a faerie sometimes too," I whisper, my words turning sticky as honey, difficult to get out.

"What? Why?"

"There's things I'd like to do…"

"Like what?"

"All sorts of things…"

But more than all the things I want to do, could do, is the desire to go home. To see Dad again. Especially now, when the world I've carved out beauty from is turning black again.

"I miss home," I whisper, even though I know it makes no sense to say I want to be a faerie and I want to go back.

I slide my arms around Hades' neck and fill myself with the scent of flowers and mint, and the tingling warmth of his skin. Slowly, his arms slide around my back, tracing the curve of my spine. He says nothing as my body turns to mush, and my thoughts turn gummy and dark.

The next morning, Hades is as jittery as a cat during witching hour. He cannot sit still. He's out straight after breakfast checking the way is appropriately lit, and when he comes back he blasts open the doors and lines the corridor with skeleton guards, dressing them up in flashy armour. Then he paces, paler than ever.

Irma sighs, leaving him to it, and places the finishing touches on the throne room.

The pillars have been roped in vines, tapestries of constellations and silken drapes blocking out the obsidian. Blue fire pounces in the sconces on the walls. The entire palace thrums with light, spots of glitter scattering the gloom like fireflies across an ink-black pond. Tables are laden with food, glistening fish, stuffed birds, current sauces, golden slices of fruit, marbled cheeses, ripe, bursting grapes in colours I cannot name. Fountains run with purple wine. It is a cathedral of the senses.

Hades is still pacing.

"Go and put your clothes on," Irma insists. "It'll be a while yet until the first will start to arrive, but, you know, take your time."

He heads to his room without complaint, and I head to mine as well. I try to unwind with a bath, but nothing helps. I'm coiled as tightly as wire, wound by fear and uncertainty.

I pull on a silk petticoat, wrap myself in a robe and head back outside, asking Irma what I should wear. She's already dressed in a floating gown of crimson and yellow, her tiny feet in sequined slippers. She looks more like a living flame than ever.

She shrugs. "Best to ask him for that. I'm not quite sure what glamoured mortal whores should wear. Even pretend ones."

I try to ignore that comment. "Is he still in his room?"

She nods.

I head along to it, rapping lightly on the door. "It's me," I say.

"Er, come in."

I push into the dimly-lit room. The dogs rush up to greet me, and I get a quick pat of Hurricane and Kerby before Fluffy snaps.

"Leave her alone, boy," Hades hisses.

He's sitting on the bed, fully dressed in a midnight blue outfit trimmed with silver and stars. He's fiddling with his cuffs. "My hands are shaking too much to do the buttons," he admits.

I cross the room and kneel in front of him, my fingers workly deftly down his arms. They trace the lines of his palms, all the way down to the tips. "All done," I declare. "Pity you can't just glamour your outfit tonight."

He smiles weakly. "A little is allowed." He waves a hand across his face, his eyes becoming a mask of black and silver, his cheekbones dusted, his lips brushed with gold paint.

"Show-off," I say. "Can you help me with mine?"

His smile drops. "What do you want?"

"It's your party, and I'm playing a role. I'm going to trust your judgement."

"Dangerous," he says. "But all right."

He sweeps his fingers across my features, and I feel my hair shift and change. He moves his hands over my shoulders, down my waist, not quite touching. My robe melts away, turning into something soft and light and lavender.

"I thought the clothes weren't to be glamoured tonight?"

Hades looks down. "No one will be expecting me to have something made for you."

"Right. I'm just a decoration."

"To them," he says. "But not to me. Never to me."

I stand up and drift towards the mirror. I'd been expecting something revealing—and it is—but I still look pretty. The sheer gown covers the parts I want covered, even if it shows off everything else: back, legs, breasts. My hair is pulled away from my face in a braided crown studded with flowers, the rest tumbling down my spine. My arms are painted with golden leaves. My face is unusually plain for the fashions of faeries; no masks of eyeshadow or unnatural lips. I look like a slightly clearer version of myself. For a minute, I wonder if this is deliberate, to make me look mortal, or maybe…

For all that he said I was beautiful, perhaps he thought that there was no way he could make me look like one of them.

And I do want to look like one of them. I want to feel as beautiful as they look, in a way that transcends physical. I know he's told me that none of it is real, but it's such a tangible illusion. I can almost taste it.

I want to be strong and glamorous and unafraid. I want to know I'll have enough time to do anything and everything I want. But I don't want the pricetag, the corruption of the years, the darkness that so many of them seemed to have.

Hades does and doesn't. There is something inside him, but it isn't like theirs. It is brittle and painful, but not twisted. Not yet.

He is only young, after all.

Impossible to believe he could ever be like Ares. But no one is born that way.

I still could not imagine him like that, not the boy that saved me, who scratched himself silly bringing my cat, whose confident demeanour wavered when he flattered me.

Not him. Never him.

"Are you all right?" he says over my shoulder. "I can probably cover more, if you want—"

"No," I insist, "this is fine."

He turns back to the dresser to cover his fingers in rings; gold bands, dark gemstones. His nails are black and painted with swirling stars.

"Can you do mine?" I ask.

"What?"

"Can you glamour my nails?"

He smiles, brushing his hands over my outstretched fingers. One hand is dawn, the other dusk.

"Any requests for jewellery?" he asks.

"Hmm" I think for a moment. "A pair of earrings, like insect wings."

They appear in my earlobes almost immediately. I admire them in the mirror; shiny, shimmery things, glowing iridescently.

He holds up a few for his own ears, fine, laced metalwork. "What do you think?" he asks.

A warm thought passes through me. "Can I—" I stop. It's too silly. Too intimate.

"What?"

"Never mind—"

"'Sephone," he says softly, "please."

I swallow. "Could I… touch your ears?"

He blinks. "You want to touch my ears?"

"I knew it was silly. They just look so different to ours. Mine. I mean—"

"No," he says, reaching out a hand towards mine, "I get it."

He examines the rounded curve of them, his touch is feather-light, and my hand creeps up to the pointed tip of his. Half a smile ghosts his face as I trace its shape, and then he bends to place a kiss against my forehead.

For a moment, I think it's affectionate, but a cool mark is left behind. I turn to the mirror again; a slight, silvery symbol is pressed into my skin in the shape of a skull and feather. The mark of Hades. "This will make you immune from being glamoured by anyone other than me," he explains. "They may still try other things."

"I know," I whisper.

"Don't go too far from my side," he says. "Or Irma's."

I know he can't keep his eyes on me the entire night, that it will be up to me to stay out of trouble, a task I've only managed to accomplish in the past by going absolutely nowhere. Despite all the training and all the advice, I suddenly feel unprepared. I don't know what to expect.

Hades' jaw tightens, and I think he might feel the same. "I wish I could do more to protect you."

I swallow. "I know that, too."

"If you change your mind about being glamoured at any point—"

"I'll come to you. Carefully. Quietly. I know."

He inhales a deep, shuddering breath.

"Are you always this nervous?" I ask him.

"No."

I lean up and kiss his cheek.

"What was that for?"

"You're worried about me. It's sweet. And I'm sorry I'm being stubborn and not letting you glamour me."

"Don't be sorry about that," he says. "I'd still worry about you if you were glamoured. At least unglamoured, you stand a chance of protecting yourself."

"What does it matter if I wouldn't remember any of it?"

"I would remember," Hades whispers. "I'd remember everything that happened to you." He strokes a loose curl behind my ear, and for a moment, inches closer, before darting away like a scalded cat. He bumps into the dresser, sending a flurry of paper creations to the floor. "Ah, no—"

He drops down to pick them up, and I hurry to help him. They're flowers, roses and tulips and daffodils, like the ones I'd made when I first arrived.

"What are these?"

"I, er, was trying to make you a bouquet." He scratches the back of his neck. "It's silly. I know. I could summon fresh ones for you any time—"

He could, and they'd be perfect, and I'd love them, but I love these more. I can see the lines where they've been torn and folded, the flaws on the hunt for perfection, the discarded failures in the bin. The same boy that came back exhausted every day this week had taken time to do this for me.

I place my hand over his as he scrambles about picking them up.

"They're perfect," I breathe. "Thank you."

He swallows. “You may not thank me after tonight. You may not even *like* me after tonight.”

“I like you?” I clutch my chest. “Are you sure?”

He splutters nervously, and even though I should probably assure him that I do like him, at least a little, I don’t. I help him collect up the paper flowers. “I won’t hate you for what others say or do,” I tell him instead. “I promise.”

He takes my hand in both of his. “I sincerely hope I never have to hold you to that.”

We head back to the throne room. Hades arranges himself on the throne, still tapping restlessly against the arm rest with his beringed fingers. The dogs arrange themselves at his side, sprawling over the steps.

“You, ah, you should be at my other side.” Hades says. “Sitting down. You don’t need… you don’t need to do anything else. Not unless…”

“Don’t need to clutch at your leg like a loyal animal, you mean?”

He swallows. “Indeed.”

I drop down to the ground and lace my fingers into his, pinning them solid. “Just while nobody else is here,” I assure him. “I’ll let go when they start arriving.”

He squeezes my hand. “And what if I don’t want you to ever let go?”

“That would be terribly inconvenient for us both.”

“I would cope.”

There is a rumbling down the corridor, and I yank my hand away.

A small, slight man with a shock of blue hair enters the room, flanked by a group of pixies, nymphs, and a few other small pretty creatures I can't name. He's wearing a crisp white suit, trimmed with gold, and wings are shaved into the side of his head.

"Lord Hermes," Irma announces.

He bows to Hades, who nods in deference. "Right on time, as always."

"It is my speciality," says Lord Hermes. "Happy Solstice, my lord."

"Please, make merry."

Hermes and his entourage drift over to the banquet table. The pixies quickly start serving wine, arranging towers of goblets on silver trays to start delivering the other more prominent guests when they arrive. They giggle and chatter, rising off the floor, their wings twitching with nervous energy.

Another group arrives at the doors, led by a tall, broad-shouldered man with hair a sunlight-yellow. His skin seems to glow.

"Lord Apollo," Irma declares.

"Hades!" Apollo springs up the steps to the throne—ignoring three growling heads—and clasps Hades' hand. "So good to see you again, old boy! And your lovely lady!" He moves to kiss my hand, and I try not to show any emotion at all. I wasn't expecting anyone to address me.

"Lord Apollo," Hades says, his face twitching. "You've arrived."

Apollo roars with laughter. "You can just say *it's a pleasure,* you know."

"If only."

This just makes him laugh more. "So serious, as always. Never mind, I shall make my merriment elsewhere. I hear your wines are fantastic."

He gives me a cheery wink and backs down from the dais.

"He seems friendly," I say when he's out of earshot.

"Never trust friendliness," Hades says through gritted teeth.

"I'm friendly. You trust me. And I'm a liar."

Hades snorts. "You can lie, Sephy, but you aren't a liar. Everyone else here can speak nothing but truth and somehow manages to lie with almost every word they say."

"You don't."

"I'm the worst of them all."

Before I ask what he means, the dark-haired woman with the silver bow I remember from Samhain arrives with a group of hunters. Lady Artemis. She gives Hades the most curt of nods and says nothing.

Emetria is next, the only one thus far to arrive alone. Aphron—the lean, heavily-made up person I remember from Samhain too—arrives shortly afterwards on the arm of Dione, Lady of Revels. They bring half of the party with them.

"Lord Hades," Dione simpers, coming up to clutch his arm. "Wonderful to see you again."

"Dione," he says flatly, "beautiful as ever."

"Possibly the most beautiful here," she says, flicking her dark satin locks over her shoulder, and

ignoring the slightly affronted look on Aphron's face. "Certainly more tempting than a mere mortal harlot."

I keep my face placid, ignoring the sting of her remark. Hades slides an arm around my waist and tugs me closer. His muscles tense. "We all have our tastes, Dione, some more perverse than others."

"I don't mind perverse," she says, leaning into his ear.

The dogs start to growl. Hades grabs her arm, not gently. "I know."

"Oh, stop hogging him, Dione dear," says Aphron, sliding an arm over her shoulders. "Hades, mortal plaything, you both look divine. Come, Dione, let's find some cocktails and get this party started."

Dione is tugged away, pursing her lips.

A few more guests arrive, none of which I recognise from Samhain or their names. I appraise each of them. Hades was right when he said the Seelie Court was full of 'the pretty ones'; everyone here is beautiful, even the fauns and the tiny household sprites. No goblins or boggans or ogres in sight.

"None of the Unseelie?"

"They celebrate in the wild. Stonehenge will be having quite the revel tonight, as will other, wilder places."

"Of course."

A muscular, bare-chested man dressed in shimmering robes arrives at the doors, carrying a trident, together with an entourage of people covered in shells and pearls. Mermaids made human.

"Lord Poseidon."

He shakes Hades' hand, ignores me completely, and heads towards the fountain of wine, laughing as his court swirls about him. It's like they've brought the water with them, their clothes and hair half-floating as if trapped in an invisible current.

After Poseidon comes a large, lumbering hulk of a man. He's not dressed for a party, he looks like he's come straight from a workshop. A giant hammer is strapped to his back, and his arms are smeared with soot and oil. Scars cover every inch of him.

"Lord Hephaestus."

"Lord Hades." He gives a bow which looks more like a shrug. "I'd apologise for being late, but I didn't want to come."

"Neither did I."

Both men laugh, and the older one slouches off to admire the armour on some of the skeletons.

The list of gods I'm ticking off in my head is running short. A few more lone faeries or small groups of them dwindle in, but most arrive with their courts.

The sound of trumpets breezes down the hall. Irma rolls her eyes and coughs loudly. "Announcing her Divine Majesty, Queen Zera of the Seelie Court," she drones. "Accompanied by Lord Ares and General Athena."

The Queen of the Faeries enters the room, and a hushed reverence falls over the crowd. They all bow to her. She's dressed in a gold gown adorned with peacock feathers, and her crown resembles butcher's knives. She is beautiful and terrible in the same breath, and her presence sucks all sound from the space, casting it into a void. I am half afraid to breathe.

To her right stands Athena, a tall, dark-skinned woman brandishing a shield, and to her left, Ares, dressed for battle, a claymore at his side.

Hades gets up, and they bow to one another.

"Your Majesty," he says, with a painted smile. "Your presence graces these halls."

A truth only because that is what his people have decided royalty does. *He* is not graced. *He* is not happy to see her.

"Quite the soireé you have accomplished, Little Lord Hades, even if the company is a bit—" her eyes rest on me— "provincial."

"Only for some," he says stiffly. "Lord Ares. General Athena. An honour."

"Well met, Lord Hades," says Athena. She looks older than the other faeries, her black hair threaded with silver, her face ever-so-slightly lined. Fifty, perhaps, by human standards. I remember Hades telling me how slowly they aged. How old must this great lady be?

Ares holds out his arm. "A dance, My Queen?" he asks. "The first of the night?"

"Of course. Lord Hades?"

Dione squirms through the crowd, hoping, no doubt to secure Hades as a partner. I know he cannot dance with me, not for this dance. But his eyes go straight past Dione to the person standing beside her.

"Aphron, Your Magnificence, would you do me the honour?"

Aphron lets out a slight gasp, mumbling something under their breath, not quietly. "He's so dark, but he's so cute, I just can't help myself." They flip their coppery hair over their shoulder, smoothing the white skirts of their ruffled gown. "Of course, Lord Hades, I'd be thrilled!"

Dione looks like she wants to murder them.

I fix my eyes to the floor, and keep my gaze down as the music plays. Although it can come from nowhere, Irma has arranged a band for the night. They're suspended from the ceiling on golden discs, and their music is strange and hypnotic.

The dancers switch partners, and Hades ends up with Queen Zera. I slide down the steps carefully, trying to overhear them.

"You put on a good show, little lord," she whispers icily.

He spins her. "I did learn from the best."

"How are you finding the isolation?"

"Refreshing."

"You ought to have some company down here. *Real* company. Not these little… toys of yours."

"Thank you, but I prefer to keep to myself."

"Well, whenever you tire of it, let me know. There are others who would relish the chance to be Lord of the Underworld." She leans in closely and whispers in his ear. I cannot hear her words, but I see Hades' eyes flicker with fear.

He misses a step, almost stumbling. Zera laughs. He offers a quick bow to her and retreats to his throne. I want to go to his side, but a gentle, firm hand catches my wrist.

"May we dance, sweet thing?"

Lord Aphron. Or is it Lady? I struggle, trying to remember their title. "Your Magnificence," I recall, nodding. They pull me onto the dance floor.

"You're much better than his usual pets," they croon, sweeping me under their arm. "And so soft on the eyes! Tell me, my dear, is he treating you well?"

"Very well, Your Magnificence," I reply with what I hope is a dreamy voice.

"Excellent. Now, tell me… what is it you desire?"

Their eyes are like kaleidoscopes, all and every colour, changing with each flickering second. I think they're trying to glamour me, but Hades' mark remains true, even when his name rises to the tip of my tongue.

"Desire, Your Magnificence?"

They sigh. "Oh well, can't blame a person for trying. Your glamour is skillfully done, you know. The glamours were always slipping off the others… they'd start screaming halfway through a dance. Terribly distracting. I love your dress by the way, honey. He may be a monster but I cannot fault the boy-king's taste. Exquisite." They raise a hand to their hair and copy my flower crown. "What do you think?"

I have to answer questions. "Exquisite, Your Magnificence. It suits you."

"I know, everything does, but you're sweet to say so. I hope he doesn't hurt you."

He would never hurt me.

"You need wine, dear thing. Let me get you a glass."

Irma assured me that all the food would be suitable for human consumption, and a glamoured person isn't supposed to refuse, so I take a few sips of Hades' pomegranate wine when it's pressed into my hands. It's as sweet as nectar.

Aphron disappears, back into the crowd of dancers. I put down the wine as soon as he's gone.

A shadow cuts across me.

"You know, I've never understood the fascination with mortals," Dione sneers. "It's like playing with an insect. Why would he dally with you when he could have a *goddess?*"

"You're not a goddess." The retort slips out before I stop myself, but I reason I'm supposed to answer questions.

Dione's eyes, like pieces of aquamarine, darken. She pushes against me, backing me into a wall. I try not to let my fear show, but I'm searching for Hades or Irma. Neither are within view. Others are, but no one sees, or cares.

She pulls a silver dagger from her side, and panic pulses through me. I can't move, I can't run. My mouth is dry, and I study the end of the blade as it drifts by my nose, closer and closer, wishing I could dissolve it with a look.

But I can't. I'm as powerless as she is powerful.

She smiles at my reaction. "Foolish, breakable mortal…"

A staff intercepts the blade. "Dione," says Emetria cooly, "it's rude to break other people's toys because they didn't want to play with you."

Dione glares. "Lady Emetria. This does not concern you."

"You are in the House of Hades. Do not dishonour him in his own halls. It will not end well for you."

Dione does nothing. Her sneer stays on me.

Emetria pushes back with her staff. Her violet eyes flash. "Humans are not the only ones who can be broken, Dione. You are no god of war. Step down."

Seething, Dione does, sliding her dagger back to her waist. Emetria straightens up, and I snatch the goblet of wine from the table to steady myself. I'm aware of how panicked I must look, how unglamoured.

"You should be careful with that," Emetria advises.

"Oh, what do *you* care?"

Emetria freezes, and I blanch. I've said too much. Far too much. "What has he told you about me?"

"My lord has told me nothing—"

"You're not glamoured."

I tense, searching for a way out of this, but she's already seen me lose my cool. I shake my

head.

Emetria sighs. “What is he thinking, letting an unglamoured mortal attend an event like this? Is this some new kind of torture he’s invented—”

“He didn’t do anything. I asked not to be glamoured.”

“What?”

“He wanted to glamour me. I asked him not to.”

She glances at him, slouching in his throne. “What kind game is he playing?”

“He isn’t playing a game.”

“He’s doing *something*.”

Something hot burns inside me. “Well, he’s not playing *your* game, that’s for sure.”

“What do you mean?”

“He told me you made him kill his father.”

Emetria tenses, and I can tell I’ve hit a nerve.

“Do you deny it?”

“No. Although I am surprised that he told you. I should have ordered him not to.”

Ordered? How could she—A realisation hits me. “You know his true name.”

She pauses, but only slightly, avoiding my gaze. For a moment—only one—I feel like the being with power, and less like a weak, foolish mortal drowning in a battle dressed like a pageant.

“And yet,” she says carefully, “I’ve made him do so little.”

“You made him kill his father.”

“Not by using that, I assure you.”

“Why did you make him do it?”

“To protect him. To protect…” She looks up. “Why am I even talking to you?”

“You care about him.”

She stiffens. “Almost like my own child.”

I take another sip of my wine, a long, slow sip.

“What he thinks I am, whatever he might have become… I am not his enemy. Nor yours.” She shakes her head. “Do not tell him we have spoken,” she says. “Forget you ever saw me tonight.”

I think she means to glamour me, but it doesn’t work. I place a hand to my head and realise my mark is hidden by a loose curl that came free when Dione tackled me. Emetria does not double check her work, and sweeps off without another word.

I finish my wine and slide back to Hades’ side. Queen Zera has just finished talking to him, but she disappears before I arrive.

“Are you all right?” he asks, not looking at me.

“That Dione is a bitch.”

A smile twitches in the corner of his cheek. “That she is.”

“Are *you* all right? That Zera is a bitch also.”

“Overheard her, did you?”

“A bit. I would have defended you but… you know. Trying to keep up the ruse.”

“You would have defended me?”

“You bet I would.”

“But… why?”

“Because… oh, crap, are we friends now? Do I like you? When did that happen?”

Hades breaks his mask to stare at me, his mouth open. I stare back, surprised by his shock.

“Now who can’t act?”

"Sephy, I—"

"You, mortal thing, dance with me."

We turn. Ares stands at the bottom of the steps, hand outstretched. I look to Hades, pleading for some kind of escape. His jaw tightens. "And what if I don't want her to dance with you?"

"Then I'd question why, brother dearest, and see what else she would be good for."

I clench my fists, and hurry down the steps before Hades breaks and shatters the ruse himself. At this stage, I'm not sure who that would be worse for. Why does nothing here make sense?

Ares grabs me and steers me onto the floor. His grip is rough, tight. I'm glad I don't have to look him in the eyes.

"You're a passable dancer, for a mortal," he snarls, his lips against my ear. "Passably attractive, too. Nice curves. Don't get that on faerie women. I can almost see the appeal."

His hands roam down my hips, and it takes all of my restraint not to seize up or slap him.

"Wonder what else you're good for. You're young, aren't you? Did my brother have to wear you in? I hear he has particular tastes."

I know I'm supposed to answer, but I can't find my words.

"Well, mortal? Answer. What's he done to you?"

I pause, gathering my lies. "Things you could only dream of. My lord is as magnificent in the bedroom as he is outside of it. Why do you question me? Compensating for your own failures in that department?"

Ares stops dancing. "You mortal *bitch*. Did he tell you to say that?" He shoves me backwards, and I fall to the floor. He raises his hand to strike me—

Fingers fasten around his arm.

"Don't," Hades growls. "Do not touch her."

"Why so concerned over a *mortal,* little brother?"

"I don't like people harming what is mine."

"Then it's just as well you have so little that can be called *yours,*" Ares sneers. "And nothing I can't take from you."

"Boys!" Artemis appears, striding between them. "I'd say it's a bit early in the night for fisticuffs, but honestly, that's entirely my style. Would you like to join us in the armoury? My hunters are eager for a fight and I think it's best to satisfy them now before we've all drunk too much wine."

Ares clenches his teeth. "I have plenty to entertain me here."

"Perhaps later," returns Hades.

I use the moment to slink away, but I get caught up in the stream of hunters marching towards the armoury. I let myself be led; I do not want to stand in that stifling ballroom any longer, beneath the force of Ares' gaze.

If this were a normal, mortal party, I'd squeeze outside for a breath of fresh air, or call Libby, or Dad, and go home. But they are nowhere to be found, and neither is home.

I should have let Hades glamour me.

"Did he hurt you?"

I look up. I've slipped in the armoury with the hunters, and Artemis is looking down at me, her steely eyes blazing.

"Lord Ares has done nothing," I answer, in what I hope is a sing-song voice.

Artemis surveys me warily. "I was not," she says, "talking about Lord Ares."

"Artemis!" Apollo appears behind her, clapping her shoulder. His laugh, his smile—everything about him is sunshine and azure skies. He's almost too bright to look at.

Artemis stiffens, her muscled arms tensing like rock. "Remove your hand from my shoulder or have it removed from your wrist."

"You would never—"

She flips him over her shoulder and slams him against the floor. He just laughs, rolling out of the way as her fist comes flying towards his face. The rest of the hunters form a circle around them, and I watch, utterly mesmerised, as the two of them explode about the room in a savage, brutal dance. They move like quicksilver, treading air, almost too fast to follow. A shimmering blur of colour, yellow, gold and white, brown and silver. They do not draw their weapons; I don't think they actually want to hurt each other, or at least, not hurt each other badly.

I am once more awed and amazed. Perhaps I should be frightened by this display of power, but I'm not. They remind me of sharpened versions of Libby.

Libby. She would love it here.

And I would love her being here.

A part of me loves the beautiful poison of this world, a part of me longs, even now, to return to those dancers, to drink myself silly until the music pours into my veins, but I love home more. I love the steady, quiet embers of the fire more than the roaring flame.

The hunters shout and jeer, urging them on, as if they've seen it a dozen times before. Apollo stops every so often to wink at the crowd, making men and women swoon.

"Stop flirting with my hunters!" hisses Artemis.

"I will, when I am dead."

"If you stop moving, I can arrange that."

He tuts. "What would Mother say?"

She punches his stomach. "Probably 'aim lower'."

Apollo laughs, barely winded, sweeping her legs out from under her with a swift kick. "True," he says. "But Dad would—"

She smacks him in the nose, so hard it cracks, and the fight reaches an end. A crowd of hunters surround him, offering to fix it. I slip away to an alcove as Artemis dismisses them, handing him a clean rag and a vial of something that smells a little like peppermint.

"Well met, Iseult."

She scowls. "Stars above, Trist. Don't call me that! No one but you has called me that in over a century!"

"People still call me Tristan."

"That's because you like it!"

"Of course I do. It suits me. Everything does."

Someone knocks against a rack of spears, sending several clattering to the floor. Artemis bristles. She does not seem like the type easily startled.

Apollo regards her for a moment. "You seem a little on edge. Are you expecting something to happen?"

Artemis does not reply.

"Art—"

"Not here," she says. "And not now."

"Then—"

"Enough."

Something trundles down the hall; a cart laden with gifts. A few of the hunters squeal, and I'm swept up again, back towards the throne room, following the mound of gifts, great shimmering boxes

and baskets, decked in silk and ribbon.

Tribute to the High Court. The Queen and her entourage gather round, cooing over the parcels. She beckons to Lord Ares. Most of the High Court surrounds them, but Hades catches my eye and slides towards me.

"What did you say to him?" he asks, a light touch at my elbow.

I gather he's referring to Ares. "That you were an excellent lover, far better than he could ever be."

He snorts. "You're lying."

"Am I?"

He turns sharply towards me. "Seph—"

"Lord Hades," calls the Queen, "this one is addressed to you."

Hades sighs and marches over to take the box from her, peeling off the packaging tiredly. He drops the ribbon to the floor and frowns. "It's an egg."

I peer through the throngs of people. It's the size of a football, pointed at the top, black with a green, iridescent shimmer.

The courtiers stare at it, offering suggestions as to what it could be.

"Ostrich?"

"Who gives an Ostrich as a present, Nigel, honestly—"

"Hippocampus?"

"Live young, you imbecile."

"Gorgon?"

"Did you pay *any* attention in history—"

"Fossilised dragon egg, maybe?"

Athena leans over Hades' shoulder, her eyes widening. She shoves the box to the floor and draws her silver shield. "That is no fossilised egg," she says.

The box trembles and shakes, and something shifts under the shell. The box jerks forward, toppling over. Something slippery slithers out, a purplish, black reptile with a long neck and clawed feet.

A few guests let out a surprised kind of 'aww'. I almost join them. It looks so harmless, pathetic even.

But then it starts to grow.

Its limbs twist and thicken, its neck flopping to the ground, writhing like a python. Claws sink into the floor, raking against the obsidian. It grows exponentially, before anyone can think to move, to scream, to gasp. It rises to full height, its fanged face almost touching the ceiling.

I recognise it from Dad's countless books, even without its several heads.

A hydra.

The screaming begins a second later, and the hydra lunges for one of the guests.

Hades snaps his fingers, and the skeleton guards leap forward. He darts backwards, covering me.

Ares reaches the creature first, swinging his massive sword.

"Do *not* decapitate it!" Athena hisses.

"You think I would do that?"

I don't need to be an expert to see that he's swinging too wildly, that his strikes could easily lob off its head without meaning to. It's impossible to get to the chest; he's too distracted with its head.

Artemis fires her arrows, but she stops her hunters; there are too many civilians, too many moving targets. Aphron runs forward with a silver whip, trying to lash it around its neck. They cannot reach the head.

The skeletons surround it, jabbing it with swords. This cannot take much longer, surely? There are so many of them, and only one beast.

The hydra launches at Ares, but Zera cuts across its path with a shriek, raising her hands. Lightning shoots from her fingertips—

And the hydra explodes into a dozen, a hundred other reptiles.

Well, *that* never happened in the myths.

Pandemonium erupts along with it. Pixies and nymphs are squealing and making for the door, but the largest of the hydras smacks several out of the air and rams against the entrance, cutting it off. Tables go flying. Chairs are everywhere. Only a few of the guests are armed; most came defenseless.

I hear a scream above me. One of the musicians is slipping off their disc. Someone runs forward to catch them, but the disc spins in my direction.

Hades streams out of nowhere, wings unfurled, covering me. The disc crashes against his back.

"Hades!"

"I'm fine," he hisses.

I wonder if the definition differs for him, or if in the chaos of it all, he thinks he is. His wings vanish, and he drags me to my feet, pulling me to the side of the room.

He clicks his fingers and a door opens up. "Go," he says.

"But—"

He races back to the fight, a golden sword appearing in his hands. Someone tugs at my elbow. Irma.

"Come," she says. "You're no good here."

Somehow, my legs detach themselves from the spot they were screwed into, and I break for the door. Irma shoves me in. "Run," she says. "Barricade yourself in your room. Stay there until one of us comes to get you."

"I'm not leaving him!"

Irma has already vanished, leaving me to contemplate the stupidity of my words. What help could I possibly be? He can handle himself. I'm no use to anyone.

And yet…

The screaming continues. No one else has noticed the door.

I am no fighter, but I'm not one to run, either.

I skid back into the room. One of the tables is on fire, a half-conscious mermaid trapped underneath it, a friend desperately trying to pull her free. I seize a bowl from one of the tables, dunk it in the fountain of wine, and douse the flames, patting them out with the sodden tablecloth.

The other mermaid tugs her friend free, and I direct them to the hole in the wall. I dart around the room, avoiding the reptiles, pointing others in the right direction.

Not strong. But fast.

Not fast enough.

Something tangles round my ankles and I smash to the floor. A huge serpent rises over me. A golden staff smashes against its head. Emetria. The second time tonight she's rescued me.

"*Run!*"

I head to the door, but only to usher in others. I can't go until I know he's safe. Irma is darting around the room, drawing out fires and redirecting them at the smaller reptiles. Slowly, their numbers are dwindling. Artemis and her archers are plucking them off one by one, Poseidon's trident is wet with blood, as is Hephaestus' hammer. Aphron is still trying to tie down the largest with their whip, Athena defends the Queen along with Apollo, and Emetria is freeing others from the wreckage.

The air is thick with the smell of smoke and blood.

Hades is at the centre of it all, surrounded by skeletons, but they keep getting blown apart by quick blasts from small salamander creatures, and every time he stops to resurrect another heap of scattered bones, he gets a little slower. I wonder how long he can keep going. I know his energy is not absolute. His shoulder is bloodied and black.

A pair of strong arm wraps around me. "Let's see if we can bait it with a little human blood."

Ares. His fingers smell of oil and copper.

I bite into one of them. Hard. He curses and drops me. "Let's try faerie blood first, shall we?" I spit.

He scrambles towards me, but the massive hydra's head cuts between us. He reacts instinctively, slicing through the neck. It thuds towards the floor and dissolves into smoke.

"Imbecile!" hisses Athena.

A second later, two necks are rising out of the stump, messy, bloody, slippery things. Heads begin to form, but before they can, Hades slides underneath the body and plunges his sword into its chest. He doesn't quite meet the mark.

Artemis fires a volley of arrows. Aphron wraps their whip around both forming necks, dragging the pulsating heads out of the way.

"Again!" bellows Athena.

Hades jerks back his sword and drives it in again, hilt deep, twisting. The new heads let out a guttural howl, and the body starts to dip and sag. Hades, clearly exhausted, does not move.

I race forward, slamming against him, and roll him out of the way.

The hydra falls with a thud, and silence echoes around the room.

It is Athena who speaks first. "My Queen?"

"I am unhurt. Lord Ares?"

"In one piece."

One by one, all the High Court report their survival.

"I'm fine," says Hades beneath me, "thanks for asking."

I realise I'm still on top of him, and quickly scramble upright. He does too.

"Many injured?" he asks anyone who's listening.

"A few," says Apollo. "I think we might have avoided fatalities."

"Fantastic," Hades drawls. He clicks his fingers, and several boxes of medical supplies appear in the centre of the room. As soon as they arrive, he sags, his energy finally depleted. I slide my arm underneath him. I'm hoping this is within my role as his mortal plaything. "Luckily, I already summoned a series of rooms for you all earlier. I myself am no healer, so if you'll excuse me, I'm going to lie down. Come, mortal."

We start to make our way towards the exit. Everyone is too shocked at first to move. We reach the corridor before anyone disperses.

"Lord Hades!" Queen Zera calls.

"Oh, what is it, Mother?" he snaps.

I stiffen. *Mother?*

Zera's eyes darken into deepest gold. "Don't call me that."

"Apologies, My Queen. Old habit. What is it?"

"You cannot leave now! We must call a meeting! You must know that hydra could have been sent by King Valerian—"

"It could have been," he says, "yet it was your magic that caused it to multiply."

"You think that I—"

"I think you capable of everything. Was it just meant for me? Did it hatch prematurely? Or was public chaos the whole point?"

"You will hold your tongue!" She points a finger, lightning crackling at the tip. Hades tenses underneath me.

"Your Majesty," says a calm voice. Athena. "Discussions can wait. Your people need you. Let the Lord Hades see to his wounds. Tomorrow we can talk strategy."

A long pause follows, but she lowers her hand. "Of course, General. You are quite right. Lord Hades." She bows her head.

"Queen Zera," he says, barely returning the gesture.

She marches back to the throne room, and we hobble along to his door. A final person cuts across us.

"Oh, what is it now?" Hades groans.

Emetria scowls, placing her hand against his blackened shoulder, and holds it as a white, warm light sears across her palm. Hades seethes quietly, but when she removes her hand, his shoulder is almost healed.

"Get some rest," she says shortly, and sweeps back to the others.

We enter his chambers. The dogs scurry forward to greet us, having slunk away when the dancing began, but he gently pushes them away.

"You'll have to stay here for the night," he says to me. "If anyone sees you have a room to yourself here—"

"I know," I tell him. I look at his velvet-canopied bed. It's large, but sharing it still feels very intimate. I swallow as I stare, as if expecting a solution to magically present itself. "There's only one bed."

He clicks his fingers. Another, smaller bed arrives beside it. "No, there isn't," he says, and then promptly slumps against me.

"You should spare your magic. We could have shared!"

"I wouldn't want you to be uncomfortable."

"Says the boy covered in wounds."

"I'm used to being uncomfortable."

I don't know what to say to that, so I steer him towards the bed and peel off his ruined doublet and shirt. Emetria has healed most of his wounds, but he's still scorched. I move to go to the bathroom to get some water to clean him up with, but he catches my wrist.

"Are you all right?" he asks.

"A bit shaken," I admit. "But I'm not hurt."

"You didn't leave. Why didn't you leave?"

"Others needed help." *I didn't want to leave without you.*

He snorts softly, almost disappointed. "That sounds like you."

I race into the bathroom, fill a bowl with water, and grab a clean towel. Hades has almost passed out by the time I get back, but he rouses slightly when I press the clean cloth to the soot, trying not to look at the carved panes of his chest beneath the damage.

"Zera's your mother," I say. "I don't think you told me that."

"She's not much of one."

"You think she organised this?"

"I don't know. I mostly said that to rattle her. Do you think it worked?" He half smiles, but it's forced. "Not a bad solstice, all in all. More entertaining than usual. Time went very quickly."

I blink at him. "I'm shocked that all of that must be true."

"I've been to some exceedingly dull parties." He plays with the ends of my hair, pulling at a loose curl. "I'm sorry. For everything that happened tonight."

"None of it was your fault."

"I don't like putting you in harm's way."

"I don't mind."

"You're lying, aren't you?"

"I suppose so."

He sighs. "Most often, when you lie, you do it to help people, to make the world seem less awful," he says. "Tell me more of your beautiful mortal lies, Sephy, and let me drown in them."

But I do not get the opportunity, because a few minutes later he's asleep.

I finish cleaning him, drain the bowl, take off his boots, and pull up the covers around him. The dogs settle down beside him. My glamour has vanished, and I find myself back in the nightgown I was wearing before.

I roll into the other bed, and try not to stare at the slow rise and fall of his chest, his sculptured profile, or the halo of dark hair against the pillow.

I try to ignore the crushing feeling of relief, that he is safe, that we all are.

I don't expect sleep to come easily, but my limbs are heavy, my thoughts too muddled to fixate on, and everything screams for release. I slide down into the dark.

Someone moans in the darkness. For a while, I forget where I am. I feel trapped, stuck inside a dream I can't wake from, and it's a fight to pull myself out of the muggy dark. I move my hands as if climbing, searching for something to hold onto.

"No, no… please don't… I don't want to…"

"Hades?"

My eyes adjust to the thin light still burning in the sconces, and I spy him, the only motion in the room, thrashing, groaning, like a ship caught in a storm. His forehead is ripe with sweat, and he shudders as though in pain. The dogs whimper beside him, nudging his side.

"Hades!" I tumble out of my bed, tripping on the covers, and scramble onto his enormous mattress. I shake his shoulders, but a heaviness grips him, pinning him to the nightmare. "Hades, wake up!"

He fights against me, murmuring, screaming. "No, no, please!"

I rake my hands down his torso, searching for any injury. I find nothing. Should I get someone? But who could I call? Where would I *go?*

I slap his face instead. "Luliver, wake up!"

His eyes fly open. Within seconds of waking, he's flipped me onto the mattress, crushing my chest with his arm, his other hand twisting mine above my head. His wings are extended, and his eyes are a murderous, glistening red. His teeth look more like fangs.

I should be afraid, and yet despite how stiff his body has gone, his hand still trembles against my chest. He's not hurting me. He's holding me away from him, like I'm the predator, like I'm the one he's guarding against.

His face is *terrifying*. But he isn't. He's terrifying and terrified.

"Hades," I whisper his name, glad that his arm is against my chest, and not my throat. "*Luliver*, it's just me. Persephone. It's all right."

His eyes soften in seconds, sliding back to gold. His wings fold away. "Persephone," he says, his tongue rolling over my name like a prayer. He drops his arms and slides into a sitting position, cowering like a wounded animal. He does not look at me. "Did I—"

"I'm all right." I roll onto my knees. "Are you?"

He glances up sharply. "You're asking me if I'm—"

"Of course. You were having a nightmare."

"It's… it doesn't…" He stops and starts several times, and I realise he's searching for something that isn't a lie.

It doesn't matter.

But it does.

It's none of your business.

But maybe it is.

I don't need your help.

But maybe he does.

"You don't have to say anything," he says. A fact. Half an instruction. No lie.

Does he want me to back off?

"All right," I tell him. "You don't have to talk if you don't want to."

He nods, voice lost, eyes down.

"But you can if you want. I won't say anything to anyone. I promise." I lean forward and kiss his cheek. "I know a mortal promise isn't worth a great deal, but you have it nonetheless."

I start to move from the bed, but his hand catches my wrist before I can leave. "A promise from you is worth far more than nothing," he says, in a kind of hoarse whisper.

I turn back to face him, and find my fingers sliding into his. I sit beside him, close as I dare. His eyes are wide with some strange kind of confusion, even more so when I start to stroke back his hair.

"I don't understand you," I tell him, "I don't pretend to know what's going on in that head of yours. But I will always be here if you wish to tell me. For the next few months, anyway." *And longer, if you want. If you ever come to me, I will be there.* "And I'm not afraid of you."

His cheeks tense, and for a moment, I think his hand trembles in mine. "Why not?"

I smile. "You're not as fearsome as you've led others to believe." *I think you might just be a sad, lonely boy, who has a darkness in him he's not been able to share.*

But you can share it with me.

I kiss his cheek again, my lips skimming the space dangerously close to his, and before I can draw back fully Hades has caught my face in his hands. He uncurls his fingers around my face, stroking the curves of my features like it's the first time he's ever touched flesh. He swallows, his gaze threading itself to mine. "I… I want to tell you," he says, his voice hitching, "I want to… I want to tell you *everything.* But I can't, I can't I…"

His voice slides away, and he dissolves into sobs, and I don't know where his mind has gone but I know I'm not leaving him there alone, so I pull him against my chest and hold him there. He resists, only for a moment, before dissolving completely, and I fold him back against the pillows, clutching him tightly in my arms.

"You're all right," I whisper. "I've got you, you're all right."

I wonder if anyone has ever been able to speak those words to him before.

We mortals really are such liars.

We fall asleep in his massive bed, occupying a tiny fraction of the space, curled together, our limbs entangled. I have never been this close to another person in my life. Libby and I have shared beds before. Her elbows always seemed to multiply and ended up digging me in the ribs or eyes. It wasn't a comfortable experience.

This is different. His hot breath in my hair feels soft and warm, his touch gentle as his fingers skim along my back. I half sink into him, our bodies part liquid, and I'm confused by this feeling of wanting to sink deeper, faster. *More.*

I feel like I'm being threaded to him, like the tendrils of my soul or whatever it's made of is diverging and affixing itself to him, and I'm not sure I want it to at the same time as being sure I want him more than I've ever wanted anything, even more than I wanted my mother, even more than I wanted her to want me. There is a strange feeling inside his arms, like if we can just stay here together, the ugliness of everything outside the room will be kept at bay.

A feeling far more terrifying than he could ever be.

I pull myself out of his arms, too addicted to the beat of his heart to rest, and eventually sink off to sleep again.

When I wake again, the sconces are brighter, and the clock reads morning. Hades is asleep beside me, and still. I brush a lock of hair from his face, not thinking.

I don't want to be here when he wakes up, I don't want him to remember I was a witness to his vulnerability. Whatever my face might show, I am ashamed of it. I know that I did not cause his pain, and yet I feel like an intruder on his past, like I'd ripped the bandage off a wound, poked and prodded it. Leaving feels like the best way to say I'm sorry.

I creep out in the corridor, my feet going immediately to the throne room. Very little remains of the battle the night before, except for a few piles of bones waiting for Hades to reanimate them, and his golden sword, polished and placed against the throne. I wander towards it, reaching out to touch the blade. It hums against my skin, not quite burning.

"You know, we fae can't touch celestial steel without facing extreme pain," says a voice from behind.

I turn. Ares is sitting beside the fire, his own blade placed across his lap. He's polishing it carefully with a velvet rag, caressing the edge with the tenderness of a lover.

"A slip of this sword and I would be scarred for life."

I think of the wounds on Hades' back, and bite my lip.

Ares gets up, clutching his sword. "How strong is your glamour, I wonder? Hades has never been very good at glamouring the others. They'd keep slipping off. I doubt the glamour would work while he was unconscious. Is that how you're able to sneak away from him? What must that be like, coming back to your senses, realising where you are, what he's done to you?"

My words freeze inside me.

"Answer me, mortal!"

"I don't know what to say."

He smiles, taking a step forward. "Are you afraid?"

Yes. Of course I am. I'm terrified. It doesn't matter that I can lie, I can't think of anything to say that will make him leave me alone. I'm fairly certain he won't kill me, but there's a hundred other worse things he could do, and I have no protection. Hades' mark has worn off. I'm not wearing my necklace. I'm completely defenseless.

"I should get back to my—"

He grabs my arm and pushes me up against the throne. I tumble backwards into the seat, the sword clattering the floor. He towers over me, a shadow made fae. His blue eyes flicker, harsh and unnatural, like cold flame.

"Stay," he snarls.

I feel something snake into me, but it hits a wall. Hades' mark must still be active after all.

I still don't move. I can't.

He raises a finger and slides it down my cheek. "The things I could do to you…"

My breath struggles in my chest. *Help, help, please.*

"I don't even know where to begin. Maybe you could pick. What would you *like* me to do?"

I swallow. "I'd like you to let me go."

He smiles. "Not quite what I had in mind."

"Lord Ares!" Emetria's voice cuts through the room. "Unhand the mortal immediately."

Ares smirks, rising upwards. "Lady Emetria. What is it to you?"

"You dishonour your host."

"Don't you think my brother should learn to share?"

"I don't think there is anything you can teach your brother."

"Oh no?" He points to the throne as I scramble off it. "I can teach him what is *mine."*

Emetria's gaze is steady and unflinching. "Perhaps there are some things you could learn from him."

He glares, his mouth twitching. "You will learn to hold your tongue."

"You will learn when not to speak."

Ares holds out his hand, and his sword snaps into his palm. Emetria raises her staff.

"You may think you are the god of war, Lord Ares, but I have fought a thousand more battles than you. Do not cross me."

"What is going on here?" Athena marches into the room, and I scurry into her shadow. It seems a safer place to be, even if I hate it, hate needing her protection, hate feeling powerless.

Ares lowers his blade, still glaring at Emetria, as if he could dissolve her with a look alone. "Nothing that concerns you, General. A minor disagreement."

She narrows her steely eyes. "Disagree with words, not weapons, although you cannot negate a strike with either. Emetria, I would have thought you would have known better."

"A temporary lack of judgement."

"See that it is. The Queen requires both of you. And someone rouse Lord Hades."

"I'll go—" Emetria starts.

"No. Send the mortal. She must be good for something."

They sweep out of the room. Emetria casts a cursory glance in my direction before she disappears into a fine golden door at the end of the corridor, and I wonder what it's supposed to mean. Her gaze follows me.

I head back to Hades' room. He's already dressed and up, but doesn't quite meet my eyes.

"Zera requires you," I tell him.

At that, he looks up. "Did she speak to you?"

"No. Athena."

"Very well." He moves to the door.

"Hades?"

"Yes?"

I don't know what to say, only I feel this strange urge to keep him, for my benefit or his, I'm not entirely sure. "Nothing," I say shortly. "I'll speak to you later."

I head back to my room and run a bath, sinking into the water and scrubbing my skin raw. It's streaked with dirt and grime, and flecks of blood. I refill the murky water and rinse everything.

I crawl damply into bed. I feel like I want to cry, but I'm too exhausted or too wound and I just *can't*.

I want to go home. Any part of the world that was once beautiful to me has been stripped away, replaced by the sounds of screams and the memory of that room crackling in blood and flame, and Ares' sneer as he towered over me.

This world is not beautiful, and I am not a part of it.

I sit shaking in my sheets for I don't know how long. My body feels cold and not quite my own.

It is a long time before there's a knock on my door.

"Come in."

It's Hades. "Everyone has left now. It's just us again."

A knot of relief abates in my chest. "Do they know who—"

"Athena will be launching an investigation. They want me to increase my forces down here in case it was an attack on me. Zera acted perfectly concerned, but then she suggested Ares lending his forces. I politely declined."

"I expect that was hard."

He does not smile, he does not look at me either. "Last night—"

"If you're feeling uncomfortable about any part of it, you shouldn't have to."

"Does that ever work for mortals? Just telling them they shouldn't feel something?"

"What works for faeries?"

He pauses, brow furrowed in thought. "An exchange. A weakness of yours for a weakness of mine."

"Nightmares aren't a weakness."

"A secret, then."

I sigh, but gesture for him to come closer. Hades closes the door but hovers beside it, as if ready to bolt at any minute.

I suppose I could just tell him about how I felt last night, or this morning. I could tell him I was afraid, and I hated myself for it. But I don't want him to know that. I don't want him to think I blame him. I don't want to give him a truth that could wound.

He deserves something raw, something deep.

There is one thing I haven't told anyone, have told snatches of it to my family and Libby, but never the whole, complete, aching truth. It's not like Dad and Alice. It's something more than one moment, one mistake. It's an ache down in my core.

"I never knew my mother," I start, wondering how much of the tale he's already deciphered from our previous conversations. "In fact, I don't really know much about her at all. That's really uncommon, for a mortal. She left me with my father when I was a few weeks old and never saw me again. I don't know what was going through her head, and I probably never will, but no matter how great my dad was, I never stopped hoping she'd come back for me." I pause, breathing carefully. This is the part that I hate, the part I haven't told. "I was really competitive as a kid. I tried to be the best at everything, because if she did come back, I wanted to be the perfect daughter. I didn't want to give her any reason not to want me."

I swallow, not meeting his eyes, but I feel them stitched onto me. I hate that I want someone who may not want me. I hate not letting Dad be enough.

And there's still a teeny, tiny part of me that wonders, if I'd been better, maybe she would have come for me.

I know that's not how the world works, that there's not some big karma wheel, that nothing I could have done would ever have brought her back, but the wound is still there. I've bandaged it up myself, layer upon layer, but sometimes it still bleeds through.

"I imagine you have been through worse, and think I'm silly," I whisper, tears prickling at my eyes.

"I don't think you're silly," says Hades, appearing beside me. "I could never think that."

"It never quite goes away, does it? The desire to impress your parents? Even when they don't deserve you."

"No, it doesn't."

I think of the approving nod Zera gave him when he spat at the faerie his brother was torturing, and wonder how many other moments like that litter his past. I wonder when he decided not to be that

way, to be the person that comforts lost spirits and folds paper flowers for mortal guests.

I wonder if my mother would have approved of the person I'm becoming. I wonder if *I* do.

On my thirteenth birthday, I waited, in my heart, for her to come, long after Libby and my other friends had left the pizza place we'd hired for the afternoon and Dad and I headed back to the flat with Aunt Imogen. I always thought about my mother most on that day, the anniversary of the day we divided. What was my birth like? What did she feel when she held me in her arms for the first time? Was it love or dread or some great intermingling of the two? Were we alone? Was she scared?

Every single year I wondered, my questions growing more and more complicated, and none more than that year. It was my thirteenth. A big one.

I didn't say anything to Dad or Imogen, but I think they knew. I started opening a stack of birthday cards on the kitchen counter, only I stopped halfway through, because I knew, with absolutely certainly that time, that there would be no card from my mother.

I started crying, and I couldn't bear to cry in front of dad, who had done so much to make this such a great day, and who deserved so much more than a daughter who didn't think he was enough. It made me angrier than ever. Angry at myself for not being stronger or more grateful and angry at my mother for disappearing without a word and making me feel this way in the first place.

I think that was the moment I hated her for the first time.

I sprinted from my seat, choking on my tears, feeling like I was going to vomit with the force of them. I ran into my room, hurled myself on the bed, and buried my head in my pillows to scream.

It was Aunt Imogen who came up to see me, rubbing my back and stroking my hair. When the sobs subsided a little bit, she did the usual; reminding me that my family loved me, that they'd always be there, that my mother must have had a good reason etc, etc.

Then, with a hand firm against my shoulder, she told me, "We are more than what people do to us. We are so much greater than how others make us feel."

She handed me a present that had just been delivered—the beautifully illustrated copy of *Peter Pan* that set my dangerous hope anew.

Come to think of it, it was probably Aunt Imogen that arranged it. Not quite a lie. Or a kind one if it was.

"Sephy?" Hades touches my shoulder. "Are you all right?"

I lean against him. He smells of warmth, something quiet and solid in a world that doesn't make a great deal of sense right now.

"Last night was terrifying," I tell him. "I thought I was OK, but I don't think I am. And I should be, because I'm not hurt and you're not hurt and nobody died but I was so, so scared and I…"

And I'm terrified. I'm terrified of your brother and this world and how I'm starting to feel about you, and I'm terrified of going home and having to be Old Sephy and I miss my father and I think I hate my mother and I think I hate myself a little bit too for not being braver or stronger.

Hades pulls me into his arms as I dissolve into noisy, guttural sobs, the kind that crash against your chest, puffing your cheeks and eyes. The kind of sobs that make you feel like you are breaking.

But I don't quite splinter everywhere. He holds me in place, tight against his chest.

Eventually, the sobs subside. He hands me a handkerchief, summons himself a new shirt to replace the snot-sodden mess I've made of his old one, and says nothing.

I dab at my eyes, wishing I was still cocooned inside his arms. "Now, you tell me something."

"You already have—"

"I know that you have nightmares. I don't know what about. And you don't need to tell me. But I want to know what the deal is with you, your mother and brother. He seemed to suggest… that he

wanted to take something from you."

Hades sighs, half exhaustion, half relief. "My mother conceived Ares a hundred and fifty years ago. He's also the son of the previous Hades. She groomed him for the role. I don't think she planned to have any more children, especially with him, but he was, apparently, 'magnetically attractive.'"

"Such a shame it doesn't run in the family…"

He does not laugh. "I don't think she would have had me, but as faerie children are so rare, it is illegal to stop their birth or conceal them once they're born."

"Well, that sucks for her, but obviously I'm super happy you're here."

He doesn't laugh at that, either.

"My mother didn't know quite what to do with me. She is very much a planner, and I didn't fit into any of her plans. My childhood was not a particularly happy one."

"What about… your father?"

"I barely knew him. Like many of our kind, he wasn't particularly interested in children, or didn't know how to speak to them. It got a bit better as I got older, but…"

"He died."

"Yes."

"Who… what happened?"

"I'm not exactly sure. I know he was hurt, that somehow Emetria found out about it first, and dragged me to his side. There was… there was a lot of blood. Emetria is a good healer. I'm sure… I think, maybe, she could have saved him. But instead they spoke, and she said she couldn't let him risk Zeron—Ares as was—inheriting the crown. Zeron had already been marked. The only way to overrule that quickly… was for someone to kill him. So they both asked me to do it."

"You *didn't* kill him. Whoever wounded him—"

"But I don't know that. I don't know if he could have lived, and I don't know who ordered the attack—Valerian, possibly. Mother. Ares. Maybe even Emetria. I can't work out how she knew, before anyone else, why she thought to take me in the first place—"

"I spoke to her last night," I tell him. "She told me she did it to protect you."

He looks at me, eyes flickering, processing the truth of her words. "I suppose it's possible, but that need not be her only reason." He surveys me carefully for a moment. "What else did you and Emetria talk about?"

"Just you. She knows I'm not glamoured, by the way."

"Hopefully that pleases her."

I don't know why that would, but I think of what I said earlier, about the desire to impress one's parents never truly leaving us. I wonder if he wants to impress her, if he'll never impress Zera. "The… the other girls you've taken down here, you glamoured them, didn't you? Your brother said you weren't very good at glamours, that they kept slipping off… but that was a glamour within a glamour, wasn't it? You made it seem like they were terrified when you'd done nothing to them at all."

He smiles. "You're getting good."

"It's a smart way to gain a terrifying reputation."

"You forget that I did still bring them down here against their will."

"To save them from something worse?"

"Most of the time."

"And then glamoured them riches or jewels or free passes to university?"

"Something like that."

I shake my head. “I don’t get it. Why are you so determined to paint yourself as the bad guy?”

He holds out his arms. “Because I look so good in black.”

I raise an eyebrow.

“Fine. I don’t want you to be disappointed in me. I figure the worse a picture I paint, the less disappointed you’ll be when you find out something ugly.”

“I don’t think you could ever disappoint me,” I say, even as the begging faerie woman flashes across my mind.

He tears his gaze away. “When… when you first take on the mantle of one of the High Court, you usually find your powers go a bit haywire to begin with. It’s raw and unbridled. I’d never had real power before, and no one was there to teach me how to use it. I obliterated the first thieves I came across, and I painted the walls with their remains as a warning to others.”

My stomach churns.

“Not pretty, right?” he continues, seeing something in my face. “It was not an isolated incident, especially as… there were other faeries down here, initially. A court of night. One of them tried to kill me, and I destroyed her too, even when she pleaded for mercy. Emetria saw. Things had been strained between us since my father’s death, but she looked at me like a monster then. I let her think I enjoyed it.”

“But… why?”

“Because it’s easier not to care about people, and it’s safer for me if everyone thinks I have no morals, no weaknesses, no way of being swayed…” He touches my cheek, lightly, and then tries to pull away.

I snatch his hand. “Easier, maybe,” I say. “But more lonely, surely?”

“Yes,” he agrees. “Definitely that.”

His fingers coil into mine, and his free hand slides to my waist. My heart skips, lighter than it’s been in a long while, and I wonder what *his* feels like, if it feels raw and exposed from the secrets he’s shared, or if it’s a good pain, like cleaning a wound. I put my hand out as if to assess the damage, my fingers trembling as they glide over his chest. He exhales, a sound between a groan and a sigh, and his honeyed eyes sink into mine. His skin is so *warm,* and his heart thuds beneath the flatness of my palm, wild and dangerous and enticing.

He closes his eyes, crow-black lashes fanning across his cheeks, and lowers his head.

My own lids sink too, and I move towards him, the gap between us closing, but before anything can happen—before I even fully understand what is happening—Pandora leaps into his lap and digs her claws into his thighs.

Hades lets out a yowl. “Dammit, cat!” He shakes his head, sighing with laughter, the moment between us shattered. He glares at her as she slinks away, as if she knows exactly what she’s done. “Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.”

I think for a moment. “Shakespeare? The Tempest?”

He raises an eyebrow. “You read Shakespeare?”

“What? Faeries have the monopoly on Shakespeare? Human teenagers aren’t allowed to read it?”

“No, it’s just unusual—”

“Of course, this human teenager doesn’t. I just read the ones the school tells me to.”

A smirk. “Breakfast?” he suggests. “I’m famished.”

“Me too,” I agree, although as we rise from the bed, I’m painfully aware of a very different type of hunger, of a lingering, unquenched thirst.

The following night, we lie under a blanket, watching something else silly and irrelevant in the mirror. The dogs are squeezed in between us, snoring lightly. Pandora has been banned from the room. Hades insists it's because he doesn't want her bullying the dogs, but I rather suspect it might be for another reason.

We haven't talked about what didn't happen, but neither of us has tried to recreate the situation. Hades himself hauled the dogs between us.

"What day is it?" I ask abruptly.

"23rd December, why?"

Two days before Christmas. I can't believe it's snuck up on me. I have a sudden longing for advent calendars, for stuffing my face with cheap chocolate and counting down the days in a rush.

"Faeries don't do Christmas, I take it?"

"No, but I'm aware of the customs." He glances at me. "Do *you* want to do something?"

Christmas isn't Christmas without weeks of preparation, without cooking enough food for five hundred, without eating turkey for days and binge-watching television and playing board games and eating enough mince pies with brandy cream to burst.

Christmas isn't Christmas without Dad-and-Sephy matching stockings, and Christmas socks, and homemade crackers and Uncle Paul's terrible, terrible singing, or without Gran's jumpers or Aunt Imogen's chocolate pudding or my cousin Henry banging on whatever new instrument someone has bought him.

It's not Christmas without family.

"It wouldn't be the same," I tell him. "I think I'd just miss all the things I usually do too much. It's probably best to skip it, right?"

He nods, but he doesn't look particularly convinced.

When I wake up two days later on Christmas morning, there is no Grandma singing in the kitchen. There's no dad making cranberry pancakes with marmalade or the warm, stirring scent of freshly made hot chocolate wafting up the stairs. There is no tree, no presents. No frosted window pane. No windows.

The enchanted ceiling above me offers a golden dawn, but today, it looks as thin and flat as paper.

There's a knock on my door. "Persephone? Are you awake?"

"I'm like… 80% awake. Will that do?"

"Are you dressed?"

"More or less," I say, pulling on a silk dressing gown before opening the door. Hades' eyes go wide at the sight of my attire, and I hope my face doesn't betray the pleasure I feel at his reaction.

He actually looks… nervous.

I savour it. "What? I'm covered."

He smiles wryly, recovering from the surprise. "Indeed. I have something to show you. You'll need to dress a little more warmly." His hands sweep over my shoulders, not quite touching. "May

I?"

"Of course."

He clicks his fingers, and I find myself in thick, fur-lined boots, a heavy brocade dress, and an exquisite red coat that fans out like a cape. I look like an older, glamorous version of Little Red Riding Hood.

"Oh, I already like where this is going." I grin, twirling around.

Hades admires me as I do so, his gaze threaded to me. "Yes, as do I." He backs towards the door leading to the gardens, the confidence in his stride returning. "Now, I know you said you didn't want to do all the Christmasy stuff because it would seem weird to do all the traditions without your family, but it didn't seem right to avoid the day altogether, so I thought… I thought maybe we could try doing stuff you'd never done before on Christmas."

"Colour me intrigued." I say, stepping up to his side.

"Anyway, I figured… well, I'll let you see."

He opens the doors and I am hit immediately by a breeze that nips at my exposed skin. White races to meet me.

I step across the threshold. I am Lucy going through the wardrobe, a child lost in faerieland. Everything is covered in perfect, powdery snow, all the trees iced in glittering white. All apart from a fir at the centre of the glade.

My footsteps crump against the forest floor, and I creep forward in utter wonder.

"I thought you'd probably never had a white Christmas before," Hades says. "So hopefully this won't…"

He stops when he sees my face. I know my eyes are glistening. I could lie to him and say it's the cold, but it isn't. It's the sheer beauty of this and the fact that he went to all of this effort. All this, for me.

My fingers skim the branches of the trees, the snow sloughing off in my hand. It's the most magnificent glamour I've ever seen.

"If I got it wrong, I'm so sorry. I can make it all disappear in a heartbeat—"

He raises his fingers, but I reach across to stop him.

"No, no. This is *perfect."*

"Then, the tears—"

"Turns out humans can cry because of something being so beautiful. Did you know that?"

"I *did* know that. Faeries are not immune to beauty, you know. You'd think we'd be used to it by now, but we're not."

He tosses his fine head of dark, silken hair, and I swear he actually glitters.

I hate it. Stupid, dumb, beautiful boy.

"Have *you* ever cried because something was simply too beautiful?" I ask. I expect him to make a joke, 'every day when I look in the mirror' but his next words startle me.

"No," he says, "but I have cried from wanting something that was."

There is a quiet sadness behind his expression, and I think of all the times he's avoided talking about love, or refused to tell me about his first kiss. There's another hurt there, one disconnected from his mother and Emetria's betrayal. One simpler, but just as brutal, and I know better than to pry.

I turn to the tree in the middle, the one devoid of ice. "You missed one."

He grins crookedly. "I thought you might want to decorate it."

"Me?"

"Well, the two of us. You know, if you want."

"It's huge!"

"We have all day."

"What are we decorating with?"

He snaps his fingers. A wooden trunk materialises in the air. He lowers it to the ground, flinging open the lid. Baubles of pure light shine in the faint blue dawn. He lifts other ornaments out too. Small winged fluttering things, giant glittering snowflakes that radiate with cold. Candles burning with synthetic fire.

But nothing looks fake. It all looks wonderfully, impossibly real.

"Did I… did I do all right?" He asks. "I can magic you anything you want—"

"No, these are perfect." *You're perfect.*

He smiles, and it is a strange, honest, secretive smile, not cruel or wry or teasing. He half looks embarrassed to be smiling at all, and turns away to start loading the ornaments. Tiny snowflakes dart about the breeze, clinging to his black hair and long lashes, ghosting his impossibly long fingers.

The dogs come bursting into the glade, skittering on the ground, snapping at the flakes before diving onto their master. Hades is knocked clean to the ground, licked into oblivion by three slobbery faces. He laughs, deep and clear, as he shoves them away from him into a nearby snow bank, acting half like a puppy himself.

I thought it was a cruel twist of fate that he was so beautiful, that it wasn't fair to trap me at the mercy of someone so exquisite, but worse than him being physically perfect is him being kind, and good. Worse is knowing it's not just his face I enjoy, it's him. He could be a hideous monster, and my heart would still flip whenever I heard him come in, would still feel my insides smiling whenever he looked at me.

Oh no, I really, *really* like him.

He sees me looking at him, and grins. "What are you thinking about?"

I've never been more grateful for my ability to lie. "That you conjure a beautiful illusion, Lord of Night." *So beautiful I believe in it.*

He smiles at me. "I was aptly inspired."

It takes hours to decorate the tree, with it being so *large* and how long I take admiring each individual piece before I hang it on the branches. We clad it with pearl beads, golden ribbons, glistening icicles and snowflakes. The entire glade hums with soft light and ice-blue butterflies crafted of frost, the air tingling with starlight made tangible.

It is more than magical. Greater than perfection.

Somewhere rises music like a hymn, low and faraway, as indistinct as a whisper. It carries the memories of the season without making me miss songs around the piano. Without making me miss anyone.

I do not feel alone.

"Angel or star?"

I look up. Hades is offering out two tree toppers, both elegant, ethereal things, brimming with gold. It is impossible to choose.

"What? No, 'shall we put you up on the tree instead, darling Persephone, for you are both an angel and a star'?"

"Well, if you insist…" He tosses the toppers over his shoulder, vanishing them into nothing, and sweeps me up into his arms. His wings unfurl and we drift upwards with the snowy breeze, me struggling against him.

"What are you doing?" I shriek.

"Putting you on top of the tree, *angel*."

"Put me down!"

I pitch myself forwards, dropping several feet into the dense snow beneath. Hades panics, falling to my side, feathers rustling against the powdery floor. "Are you all right? I'm sorry, I should have asked before—"

I laugh, smacking the side of his face with a snowball and pulling him down to the ground. We roll through the thick, powdery mounds.

The dogs are thrilled. Even Fluffy is happy today. He nuzzles Hades' side, making him tense with laughter.

"Oh my god," I say, leaning forward in delight. "You're ticklish."

Hades' eyes widen as I launch myself at him, my fingers scuttling under his arms and down his sides.

"No, no, Sephy, please—" He giggles. The Lord of Night *giggles*.

"Hades, the Lord of Night, is *ticklish—"*

"You may be mistaken—"

"But I'm *not."*

"Sephy, stop! Stop! Please!"

"All right," I say, inching back. "I will respect your boundaries. You know, like you're famous for doing."

Hades pouts, and I wonder if I went too far with the barbs. He usually *is* pretty good at respecting my boundaries.

"What?"

"So," he says, "I didn't actually want you to stop."

"Oh, all right then, if it's more tickling you desire…" I creep back towards him, my fingers going for his middle. Then, at the last moment, I grab a fistful of snow and shove it down his back.

Hades winces, his features contorting. Half a smile simmers there. "Oh, you filthy lying mortal…"

I laugh, rolling out of the way before he can catch me with a snowball.

After we're done playing in the snow, we head into the kitchens to warm up, drinking chicken soup from bowls and dipping in chunks of thickly buttered bread.

"So, what next?" asks Hades. "What is something you've always wanted to do, but never done?"

"Hmm…" I think for a moment, memories flitting through invisible Pinterest boards. "I've always wanted to make ridiculous Christmas cookies."

Another click. A boatload of ingredients and a large cookbook appear on the surfaces. Hades looks at me with a barely contained smile. "Whenever you're ready."

In a whir of flour, sugar, butter and spices, I mix up a huge batch of cookies and roll out the dough. Hades and I stamp out shapes: trees and stars and snowmen. We grease the baking trays and slide them into the oven, and then he paces about the room like a displeased cat, waiting for them to emerge.

He tries to eat one straight from the tray. I smack his hand away.

"Ow!"

"That didn't hurt."

"My feelings are very delicate," he says, massaging his fingers.

"They aren't ready yet."

"But they smell *so good*."

"But they need to *look good,* too."

"Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, 'Sephone."

I glare at him, my eyes daggers.

He sighs, slipping up on the counter top and folding his long legs. "But whatever you desire!"

"You're sitting in a patch of flour, do you know?"

Finally, mercifully, the cookies are ready for icing. We halve the batch. I stare at the picture in the illustrations, do one wonky practise biscuit that I break into three for the dogs, and successfully master the rest.

Hades looks over at my cookies. "Damn, yours look really good." He glances down at his own. "These are terrible."

"It was your first attempt."

"It was a terrible attempt. No, no. I shall not have it." He clicks his fingers, summoning a fresh set of plain biscuits.

"Hey! I worked really hard baking those!"

"These will taste just as good."

I seize one and shove it into my mouth. Sugar and cinnamon burst across my tongue. "Dammit, I hate it when you're right."

Hades grins, grabbing the icing pen and turning back to the batch. He sticks his tongue out as he works, copying my design, until an almost perfect set glistens in front of us. He claps his hands, sending a cloud of icing sugar dancing around the kitchen. "Aha! These are perfection! You may now refer to me as Hades, Lord of Frosting!"

"I will be sure to do that," I tell him wryly, "in front of as many people as possible."

He smiles, warm and supple as a summer reed, and leans across to take one of mine. He bites into it, the crumbs clinging to his lips. He lets out the softest moan. "You can be Queen of the Bake, if you like. High Queen of the Biscuits. Temptress of the Kitchen—"

"Stop—"

"Why?" he says, stepping closer. "Too much?"

Too close. Too close. Far, far too close.

And not close enough.

I swallow, wondering how much of me he can sense. Is he aware of my pounding heart? Am I blushing? Are my pupils blown wide?

Not letting him know how I feel is the only power I have over him, the only power I have at all in this place. If I give in to it—if I lean across now and kiss those crumbs from his chin—I'll have nothing. I will be entirely at his mercy.

And yet I'm not so sure I mind, any more.

"'Sephone? Are you all right?"

"Perfectly fine."

Hades brushes the crumbs away, looking disappointed. I try not to let that fall into me.

I can't possibly have anything that feels remotely like Christmas dinner, but I consent to a cheese and wine tasting, Hades being determined to find me a wine I actually enjoy that isn't faerie-laced. He conjures a selection of the finest mortal delicacies, and eventually I find one that doesn't taste like sour grape juice.

"I like that one."

"That one?"

"Yes, why?"

"That is the cheapest, ugliest wine—"

"I'm not sure a wine can be ugly—"

"Oh, they can be, and that wine *is."*

"It's fruity."

"'It's fruity.' No. No Sephy, I absolutely refuse to let that be your favourite. Try something else. Immediately."

"No.3 was quite nice too—"

"No! Not the Merlot either! What is wrong with your taste in wine?"

I narrow my eyes. "You can be a real jerk sometimes, you know?"

"I am intimately aware of my jerkish tendencies. Are you, however, aware of your terrible taste in wine?"

I darken my scowl. "Don't yuck on other people's yums."

"Oh, well, we all have some flaws, I suppose."

"Yes. Some more than others," I say, although the list of his is diminishing by the day.

I neck back my favourite choice of wine. Hades suppresses a shudder at my actions.

"Summon a fire," I tell him. "I want to toast marshmallows."

We toast marshmallows on an open fire, and then I challenge him to a game of "chubby bunnies"— how many marshmallows can you get in your mouth and still manage to say "chubby bunnies". Hades manages nine. I get in six.

"You have a really big mouth!" I sneeze, choking on my mouthful of marshmallows.

"I believe the words you're looking for are *kissably soft* mouth."

"I believe the word I'm looking for is irritating. You have an irritating mouth."

"Irritatingly good-looking?"

I purse my lips, struggling against a rising smile, intimately aware of just how irritatingly good-looking and kissable his stupid mouth is.

"'Sephone," says Hades, his voice grave, "I have to tell you something."

"Yes?"

"I actually really don't like marshmallows."

"Oh god, me neither, they're just weird sugary foam things."

"Right? They feel so weird in your mouth!"

"I know!"

"Then why did you suggest this?"

"Um, partly because I hoped they'd be better toasted but also partly because I wanted to see you with hamster cheeks."

He shakes his head. "You delight in vexing me."

"You make it so easy." I splutter with laughter. "OK, marshmallows suck. How about chocolates and a terrible Christmas film I've never watched before?"

He flicks his hand, and the magic mirror drops from the ceiling. "Anything particular you have in mind?"

I don't truly remember what we watch. I know it has every cliché in the book and I feel like I've watched it before, but the details become hazy as soon as it finishes.

I remember clutching a pillow and lying against Hades' shoulder.

I remember that feeling so natural, so normal, that it took me a while to realise I was doing it.

I remember it sent a new kind of liquid warmth straight through me, the kind you feel in your

bones.

I remember not wanting it to finish, because I don't want to move.

But eventually, the film is over, and the clock chimes midnight. The day is over, too. Hades walks me back to my room. He's placed a wreath on my door, one that murmurs with golden glamour. I'm surprised there isn't mistletoe.

I'm surprised I'm looking for it.

Most of all, I'm surprised I'm disappointed it's not there.

I've almost forgotten it's Christmas at all. I think that was what he was trying to do. Give me a taste of what I was missing without reminding me of what wasn't there.

And it worked.

And I… I am at a loss for words to explain how thankful I am.

Or how I don't really want this night to end.

I don't know how to say goodnight.

I stall at my door, admiring the wreath, running my hands over the ribbons and dried oranges and bundles of cinnamon.

"Hades—" I start.

He leans closer. "Yes?"

"Today was… today was really…" I stop, collecting myself. "It was perfect. Thank you."

Hades blinks, as if my words have surprised him. As if he didn't expect me to say anything at all. "You're welcome."

I lean up and kiss his cheek, lingering longer than I should.

"You missed," he says, when I draw back.

"What?"

"My lips. They're right here—"

I push him away from me. "In your dreams!" *In mine, too.*

"Frequently," he says. He's still smiling, but there's a ghost of a sigh. *He cannot lie.*

He has dreamed of kissing me. Actually dreamed of kissing me. More than once!

"Well…" I say, "goodnight."

I stumble backwards into the room and shut the door before I can think too much about it, and throw myself down on the bed. I stare up at the ceiling, hugging a pillow to my chest and dreaming of mistletoe, and how, in one day, he's managed to make this world magical again, so magical I want to be a part of it.

I don't miss home, not right now. Instead, I feel the quiet dread of knowing just how much I'm going to miss *him* and this, when I return to the mortal world.

I feel like I belong nowhere, but a quiet tug at my heart tells me I might belong with him.

And of all the dark and horrifying things I've seen in Faerie, that is the most terrifying of all.

I'm still reeling from the weight of what he did for me days afterwards, still unable to look at him without feeling this great surge of gratefulness… mingled with other, more complicated feelings. I eventually decide I need to do something to even the score and spend the better part of a day knitting him a terrible scarf when he's out. I try to crochet little dogs, feathers and lightning bolts, which has limited success.

I'm almost too ashamed to give it to him.

He comes back one evening as I'm eating dinner, and I push it across the breakfast bar as he's rooting in the fridge. He pours himself a glass of wine and takes a long sip before turning around and eyeing the gift. It's prettily wrapped in loose fabric and one of the hundreds of ribbons I found in my closet.

He frowns. "What's this?"

"A belated Christmas present," I say, not quite meeting his gaze. "Since you went all out for me."

He picks it up with trembling fingers. "For me?"

"Yes, it's just—"

He unwraps it without another pause, eyes widening as he holds it up.

"It's stupid," I say. "It's not my best work. It's clumsy and silly and I don't expect you to—"

Hades practically catapults over the bar, launching into my arms. "It's magnificent," he whispers into my hair. "I shall wear it forever."

"Even out of season?"

"Darling, I make the season!" He smirks, drawing back to wrap it around his neck. "What do you think?"

"I think you're far too pretty to be wearing a scarf that ugly."

His grin broadens. "I have something for you, too."

"Oh?"

He waves his hand, and a white silk box appears out of nowhere. "I was going to give it to you for Christmas, but I didn't want to go overboard."

I seize the box and pry it open, stifling a gasp. Sitting on a bed of moss is a necklace composed of petals and gold, some beautiful chimera of nature and metal. It reminds me of April Showers, of May Day mornings, of gardens after rainfall. It's like he's captured spring dew.

"It's magic, but it's not like a glamour," he explains. "It won't fade."

"It's beautiful." I sweep my hair over my shoulder and bring the chain to my neck. Hades helps with the clasp, his fingers skimming my flesh. His touch whispers there, a breeze in the midst of summer. "Thank you."

"The scarf is better."

"That… that is a lie, surely?"

He shakes his head. "The scarf is better because you made it. I just found this."

"I love it."

"I'm glad."

I sip the rest of the blackberry wine in front of me. I need it to dispel the intensity of his gaze. "Glamours don't work so well when you're asleep, right?" I ask, just for something—anything—to say.

"It depends on the glamour, but yes. Ones on things and buildings cling better, ones on people fade. Depends on the strength of the caster, too."

A part of me had always wondered if a part of his appearance was glamoured, something more than the kohl and the black nails that sometimes swirled like starlight, but watching him sleep was just as devastating. It really wasn't fair.

"You're blushing," he says.

"It's really warm in here."

He lets out a long, slow breath, and the air around me chills.

I change the subject. "I noticed, at the party, that the members of the high court all had these weapons—"

He tenses, but only slightly. "The Immortal Weapons," he says, "or the Celestial Blades. Crafted from the divine metal."

"They weren't all blades."

"No. When you ascend to your position and touch the weapon for the first time, it takes on a new form, one that reflects the bearer's nature."

"Explains Ares' claymore. Do you think he's compensating for something?"

Hades chokes on his wine.

"If I had a weapon that reflected me, what do you think it would be?"

"A rapier," he says, grinning. "For your wit." He puts down his glass. "Have you finished with dinner?"

"Yes, why?"

"Fancy a walk?"

"You've not eaten yet."

"I can gorge on the pleasure of your company—"

"Hades," I say warningly, "eat something."

"All right," he relents. "But *then* will you come on a walk with me?"

"Happily."

He blushes at that, and I tease him for it. I clean up the kitchen as he eats, even though the room has a habit of clearing itself. It gives me something to do.

"I wish we could eat together more often," I say, "I know you're busy—"

"You want to eat with me?" Hades looks up, eyes bright. "The Underworld be damned. Persephone wants to eat with me. I'll be back at six every night."

"You can't guarantee that—"

"Hmm," he says thoughtfully, "I suppose not, but I can make a valiant effort. Just promise me you won't wait for me. Or be mad if I'm late."

"I can promise one of those things."

"Which one?"

"Well, I really like food, so…"

He laughs, flinging aside his napkin and magicking away the dishes. He yawns as he takes my arm and steers me into the corridor.

"Are you sure you're not too tired for a walk?"

"I'm never too tired to spend time with you."

"That really ought to be a lie."

"And yet it is not."

We reach the gardens, and he tugs me away to a secluded pool. Sparkling, luminescent fireflies glitter along the surface, the entire glade dripping in living moonlight.

"Fancy a swim?" he asks, his smirk sinful.

I tilt my chin towards him. "Are you going to summon me a bathing costume?"

His eyes glint. "No."

I grin right back, seizing the skirts of my dress and hauling it over my head, letting it drop to the ground. I stand on the downy, blue-green grass in nothing but a silk slip.

A very thin silk slip.

Hades eyes widen, and I keep my gaze on him as I drift to the water's edge, and slip into the pool. The waters are as soft and smooth as satin.

Hades tumbles in afterwards, disrupting the pristine surface like a large, boisterous dog, but he stills when he reaches my side. The water glistens against his skin, and I slide a hand across his shoulder, not thinking, before quickly pulling it back again. I leave no time for that gaze to sink into mine, that dangerous, destructive gaze I keep toppling into.

At the same time I desperately, desperately want for him to pull me back.

I dive under the water and open my eyes. I expect the water to sting, but it doesn't. Everything is clear and glorious. I chase thin streams of light along the rocky bottom.

Hades comes with me, gliding over my body, a shadow against my skin. Faint fingers slide through the water, nearly touching, not quite. Our heads almost meet.

Kiss me, I urge him, my thoughts rising within. *Close the gap. Go on. I dare you.*

Instead, he grins, snorting out bubbles, and we break to the surface for air.

I wonder if he ever plans on kissing me again, or if I need to do that part myself.

Hades hauls himself out of the water and lies back against the bank. I scramble out after him, not half as elegantly, and we lie together staring up at the fake blue-black sky.

"Feeling refreshed enough yet?" I ask.

"A little," he says, yawning. "You may need to think of other pastimes to keep me up."

"I think you need to go to bed."

He sighs. "You're probably right…" He waves his hand, and dries us both. I can see the energy slipping away from him.

I stand up, offering my hand. "Come on," I say, "let's go home."

We slide into a routine, and my days no longer feel as empty as they did before. Hades tries to be more set with his patrol, allowing times to come and break with me. I spend more hours in the gardens, growing anything I can, medical plants and magical flowers in a glade filled with glittering light. It is an utterly beautiful place to be, but my favourite part of any day is the time that's filled with him.

I'm too scared to let him know that, but I'm worried he can tell, every time I smile when he

arrives back early, or I elbow him in the side when he's teasing me or refuse to let him try whatever new monstrosity I've cooked up in the kitchen.

He tries to make it home in time for dinner every night, but sometimes he can't make it, nor can he send me word. I eat alone when that happens, unwinding by myself. He always comes to see me when he's back.

One night he stumbles in later than usual, falling into the sofa beside me with a plate of leftovers that he can barely eat.

"Rough day at the office?"

"I've had to animate so many skeletons, I'm completely drained."

"Lots of thieves about?"

"A silly amount. Not just goblins either. Redcaps, boggans… and infestation of nixies in one stream. I need them to think I'm around even when I'm not. I'm just… I'm really tired." He pushes his plate aside. "I appreciate you cooking. You don't have to. I *can* summon anything."

"Is it bad?"

"No! Not at all, I just… I don't want you to think that I'm ungrateful."

I shrug. "I like cooking. And it's not like I have much else to do here…"

"Uh-huh…" He lies back against the sofa, closing his eyes.

"You don't have to stay up, you know."

"Oh, but I do. This is my favourite part of the day."

"Because you're not working."

"No, not because of that."

His words pulse against my throat, as soft and as tender as kisses. For a moment, all reason and sense gush out of me. Then I stiffen, and think more about him, and less of his words. Of course this time with me is his favourite time. If I was out slaying demons all day, having someone, anyone to come home to would be a pleasure. It isn't necessarily me he enjoys, but company in general.

I think.

I hope.

I hope not.

"You should go to bed if you're tired."

He looks up at me blearily. "If you don't want to—"

"No, no, that's not it! I just… I want you to take care of yourself."

"If you don't mind, could I just stay here with you, a little longer?"

I smile, shuffling forward, and pull him down into my lap. For a moment, I forget that I'm scared to let him know how I feel. I forget everything, like the whole world has narrowed to this tiny point between the two of us, and there's no future or anything threatening to divide us.

"Umm… what are you doing?"

"I'm letting you lie in my lap."

"But… why?"

"I don't know. It's a thing people do. Why? Don't you like it?"

"I didn't say that."

He plays with the ruffles of my skirt, and I stroke back his hair, trying not to think too much about the warm satin feeling beneath my fingertips as they brush against his skin. He relaxes, drifting further into me.

"Hmm," he murmurs, "that's nice."

"Yeah, it is."

"Sephy?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For not hating me. I was so worried… that you were going to hate me… you should have hated me..."

He nods off, but I make no move to slide away. I remain there underneath him, utterly and inexplicably tied in place, wondering which one of us is the ship in a storm, and which one of us is the anchor.

How could he ever think I would hate him? That anyone, once they got to know him, would hate him?

"Hades?" I whisper, but he does not reply. He has slipped away to some soft, faint sleep, his hand curled into my skirts. I slide my own underneath those long, perfect fingers, elegant and gentle and strong. "I don't think I could ever hate you."

I know I can't stay all night on the sofa. There really isn't enough space for two of us. It'll get uncomfortable really quickly.

But I stay there underneath him until I've almost drifted off myself, before tugging myself free and draping a blanket around him. I stroke his cheek and smooth back his hair, and think, for a flash of a second, about kissing him.

Perhaps it'll be less terrifying if I do it when he's asleep, if I can't see his reaction, if he never knows…

Sephy, that is incredibly creepy. Back off.

He probably wouldn't mind.

What is wrong with me?

I can't let myself fall for him. I can't abandon all logic and sense. If I do, I'll never claw it back. And Irma was right; this can't end well. Heartbreak lies ahead, and I can't risk it. Not even for him. *Especially* for him. If I crawl down into that cavern with him, I'm not sure I'll return. I'll spend the rest of my mortal life pining for these months in the dark. And him…

He can't think of me forever, but I also think it will hurt more when I leave if things between us deepen any more than they have already. And I don't want to hurt him. I *can't.*

But I'm also not sure I can stop what's already begun, and I feel all the powerlessness of a sailor in a storm, begging the sea not to drown them.

Hades keeps grinning at me over breakfast, as if he can read my thoughts. It's incredibly distracting. And irritating. I'm almost glad when he leaves.

Almost.

I bake a loaf of chocolate and banana bread. I go back to the garden and take cuttings of the herbs. I start to experiment with making potions based on a book I've found, although I'm not certain of my ability.

I make an ungodly mess, but I feel like I'm learning, so it's not wasted effort.

I wonder if I could add magic herbs to my cooking…

I watch some daytime cookery shows for inspiration, and the day passes surely enough.

Hades doesn't come back for dinner. I try not to be too disappointed. I leave some out for him, a little bit glad that this sort of thing can't be forever even though I also like less and less the feeling of leaving.

I'm getting used to Dad not being here, and the lack of real sunlight. I'm getting used to so many things, if I ignore the way I feel about Hades.

Which I must, if I hope to stay sane.

An hour later, he's still not back.

I try not to worry, but soon it's the latest he's ever been.

Deciding that doing something is better than doing nothing, I head outside the doors, hoping to see him on his way. I'm resolved to go no further than the bridge, within easy running distance of doors.

Sure enough, I soon see him swooping through the sky, slightly more clumsily than usual. He drops to the bridge, rising to his feet and stumbling. I race forward, stopping just ahead of him. He's scratched up, dishevelled.

"Let me guess," I say, trying to still the panic in my voice, to sound humorous rather than worried, "you've had worse?"

He leans against the railing. "I… I'm not sure…"

I inch forwards. "Hades?"

In the light of the river, I notice for the first time how pale his face is, the sheen of his skin. He slumps forwards, just as I come rushing towards him. "I think it's poisoned," he whispers hoarsely. He peels back his doublet, revealing a sticky wound underneath. I stifle a gasp. "Please don't let me die."

I drag him into his room, his strength fading fast, every step a struggle. Almost his entire weight falls into me. I had never thought it possible he could be like this, soft and tender though he was, he seemed unbreakable in body.

"You're going to be fine. You're going to be fine, don't worry…"

He groans as I lower him onto the bed, a sound that cuts through me as sharply as a blade. "Damned mortals and their lies…"

"Just… try to stay calm. I'm going to fix you, I…"

I peel off his doublet, lifting the shirt over his head and lying him back against the bed. The wound at his side pulses, blood congealing on the sheets below. There's a lot of it. Way more than before.

I stiffen, freezing momentarily, before seizing the discarded shirt and shoving it against the hole. Hades hisses, but the action starts to choke him.

"Hades…" I hate how helpless my voice sounds, how helpless he *looks*.

"Antidote," he rasps, pointing with a bloodied hand. "Side cabinet, green vial."

I hurry over to it, wrenching open the door and flinging out the contents until I grasp a thin green vial. My stomach clenches. It's too light.

"There's not much… Will it be enough?"

"Hopefully."

I throw it into his outstretched fingers, but his fingers struggle with the lid.

"Let me—"

I unstopper it and lift it to his trembling lips. He takes a few sips, coughing it down.

"Pour the rest on the wound…" he instructs.

There are only a few drops left, but I pour it onto his ravaged skin, making the wound smoke.

Hades lets out a sharp cry, fingers coiling into the bed sheets. The wound continues to smoke and steam, not healing.

"There wasn't much," I rush, wishing there was more I could do. "I can make more, maybe, if you tell me—"

His fingers clasp around my wrist. "No," he says, his voice low, "Don't go. Stay."

I swallow, my throat raw. "All… all right." I pick up the shirt with my free hand and pull it back over the wound. "It's still bleeding."

"It'll clot soon enough."

And if it doesn't?

"Let me get some water," I insist, tugging my fingers free. He does not put up much resistance. He can't.

I hand him a glass, filling up a basin while he guzzles and heading back to his bedside to clean some of the mess. The sheets are thick with blood.

He leans back against the pillows, devoid of colour. He says nothing as I scrub his hands,

wiping all traces of the blood from his body. His skin still has a pale, sickly sheen.

"You'll be all right, now?"

"Yes," he says. "I think so."

"Good."

He doesn't look all right, but I try not to fixate on it. The basin magically refills, cleaning the water. I dab at his brow, trying to ignore the dark, glassy gaze fixed on me.

"You looked worried," he observes.

"I was worried." I pause, shoving down my fears, trying to sound light-hearted. "It would be boring without you, and I wouldn't want to be trapped down here forever."

He snorts, but turns his face away, his expression glazed with something like disappointment.

You could never disappoint me, he'd once told me, drunk and delirious, but I think I disappointed him with that remark.

I touch his cheek. He's hot and clammy.

"How long till the antidote takes effect?"

"Don't know."

Despite the flushness of his cheeks, he shivers underneath my touch. I pull a blanket up around his shoulders and yank off his boots, trying to make him more comfortable. I don't think it helps.

"Are you going to tell me what happened?"

"Ambush. Didn't see it coming. Not goblins. Pixies, I think."

"Pixies can be warriors?"

"They can be as vicious as the rest of us when the occasion calls for it."

"Any idea who sent them?"

He shakes his head. The dogs come round to his side and nudge his hand. He fondles their ears absent-mindedly. "Sorry to worry you, boys."

"You worried *me*." *You're still worrying me.*

Hades fixes me with a dark gaze. "Then I'm sorry for that more."

His fingers reach up to lace into mine, tugging me closer. I collapse at the slightest pressure, falling against his chest, mindful of my weight, how easily I could hurt him, how much I want to take all of it away.

He groans underneath me.

"Sorry," I say, drawing back. "I didn't mean to—"

"No, it's not—"

My hands go to the loose bandage over the wound. It's soaked through. Quiet panic splits through me. "It's not clotting," I report.

"Hmm. Troubling."

"*Troubling?"*

"We clearly didn't have enough of the antidote."

I shoot up. "I'm going to try and make more."

"Perseph—" He tugs on my sleeve.

"Let me go!"

"The leaf doesn't grow in the garden."

I snap back to him. "How do I send for someone?"

"You can't."

"There must be something I can do!"

"There is," he says softly. "Stay with me."

"That… that sounds like goodbye. No. No, I won't do it—"

"I'm not dead yet," he says. "Maybe I just need more time…"

I highly doubt that. "I'm not just going to sit here and watch you…" My mouth can't form the word.

He manages the faint trace of a smile. "Perhaps you could lie down instead."

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"Flirt with me."

"Ever, or at a time like this?"

"You can flirt with me all you like," I tell him. "But not when you're like this."

"I'll remember that invitation if I live to see tomorrow."

"You are *going* to live to see tomorrow!"

He coughs noisily, turning his head away from me, groaning into the bed sheets. His body shudders and convulses.

"Persephone?" he whispers.

I clutch his hand. "I'm here."

"You know when I told you I was going to be all right?"

"Yes?"

"I may have been mistaken."

"You… you're going to be fine."

He smiles at me. "If only mortals could make things true by saying them…" He coughs again. "The podium by the transportation ring. Take the dogs with you, and throw in a piece of paper. Ask for Emetria. I don't trust her, but I trust that she'll help you."

"What… what are you telling me?"

"How to get out, just in case I die. I wouldn't want you trapped down here forever—"

"I wouldn't want you dead. So, I repeat, *you're going to be fine*." I shake my head. "I'm sending for someone now."

"They won't come."

"What?"

"I don't know who ordered the attack, but Hermes monitors the messages. He'll report news of my imminent demise to my dearest mama, who will prevent me from receiving any aid. She probably won't care so much about you, not once I'm dead. I hope."

"You're not even going to let me *try*?"

"The route is… not safe."

"I don't care!" I snap. "I don't care about anything except…"

My words fall away from me, and he stares at me blankly, before twisting onto his side, coughing. "Tell me you care about me," he wheezes.

"If… if you're putting this on just to worry me, you can stop now. I am worried and it's not funny and if you're doing this on purpose I'm going to hate you so much…"

"That's nice…" he whispers.

"What is?"

"That you don't hate me already."

"I could learn to hate you. If you die, I'll despise you. I swear it."

"I don't think there's anyone in this world who would despise me for dying, so thank you, for that."

"Hades!"

"Say nice things, Sephy. I've had so little in the way of nice things…"

"Stop… stop talking this way."

"I'm glad you're here. I'm glad it's you. I wouldn't want anyone else." His fingers graze my cheek. "I don't think I've ever wanted anyone else." His head falls against the pillow, his eyes drooping.

I seize his face. "Luliver. Tell me your true name."

"Why? What would you do with it? Etch it into your heart? Tattoo it on your chest?"

"Please," I beg, "tell me."

"Luliver Edelvard Lore," he splutters. "But you can call me whatever you like…"

"Luliver Edelvard Lore," I rush, "I command you not to die. I command you to stay here, beside me, in this world. Do not die. I forbid it."

"It… it doesn't work like that…"

"It can't hurt!" I stroke his face, half gripping it, desperate to cling to some part of him. "You dying would hurt. You dying would destroy me."

He shakes his head. "Damn mortals and their lies. You've no idea how sweet that sounded."

"That wasn't a lie," I return. "And you're still forbidden to die. Do you hear me?"

He looks up at me, his pupils blown wide. "I hear you." He shivers. "Keep… keep talking, Sephy. Tell me more of your beautiful mortal lies."

He's growing colder, his warmth falling away from him. His skin glitters like ice. That can't be normal, can't be good. I seize his hand. It feels numb underneath mine, with barely any strength to hold back.

"I'm not going to lie to you," I say quietly, "I'm going to tell you the truth. I'm going to tell you that I want to keep you here. I'm going to tell you that I like you, possibly more than I've ever liked anyone before. I'm going to tell you that I can't say anything like goodbye because it hurts too much. I'm going to tell you that I care about you. I'm going to tell you that this dark world is the most beautiful I have ever seen, and that… that it's beautiful because of you. I'm going to tell you that you're beautiful, too, and good, and I see you, and I know you, and I *like* that person, and I don't fully understand why you have to hide him, but I'm glad I get to see him. My world would be darker without you in it."

Faint fingers trace my lips. "Pretty words," he whispers, his voice a phantom. The fingers graze over the rest of my face. "Pretty…"

He slumps backwards, eyes rolling.

"Hades!"

"Still here…" He squeezes my hand. "I don't want to die," he says. "I don't want to leave you, either."

"Then don't." I shift my position, getting up on the bed, and lie down beside him. I keep my hand tangled in his, but curl the other into his whole body, drawing him closer to me. He moans slightly under my touch. "I'm sorry, am I hurting you?"

"No," he says, with a vulnerability I'm not used to, "I'm just frightened by how much I want you here."

"I want you here, too." My voice hurts. All of me hurts, as if I'm the one with a gaping hole in my side. "But not like this. I want you well and whole and teasing me."

"Want me to say something horrid?"

"I want you to be yourself."

"I am being myself." He shivers. "I'm cold, Sephy."

I wrap my arms more tightly around him. "Be warm, Luliver."

I reach up and kiss his cheek, but at the same moment, he turns his head, and my lips brush his, just for a moment.

They hang there a little longer than they should.

He smiles at me faintly. "Not a bad thing to take with me."

I crawl under the covers, sliding a hand under his shirt, against his cold flesh. "You are not going anywhere."

"Kiss me again and I'll consider it."

He manages a crooked smile, clearly not thinking I'll do it, but instead I seize his face and slam my mouth against his, kissing him with all the force that I dare, trying not to think about how cold and limp he is beneath my touch, how fragile the fingers are that he weaves into my hair.

It is utterly and completely different to the Samhain kiss, with so little force, so little life, that I almost want to cry. I cling to the memory of other touches, other caresses I didn't stop to appreciate, always assuming we'd have more time.

"You undo me," he murmurs into me.

"You undo me, too."

"How shall I ever know if you're telling the truth?"

"Glamour me."

"What?"

"Glamour me. Compel to tell you the truth. I give you full permission. I… I need you to know. I need you to understand."

He presses his forehead against mine, and then pushes me back, just a fraction, looking into my eyes. I feel a feeble power race into me, and I open to it.

"Tell me, Sephy, do I undo you?"

"Yes," the answer rushes out of me, unbidden.

"Do you want me?"

"Yes."

"In what way?"

"All the ways."

"I don't understand," he says, with genuine confusion, "what do you like about me?"

"I—" I falter. Even in my glamoured state, the list seems too long, inexhaustible.

Hades groans underneath me, and the tendrils of his faint glamour slip away from me.

"Everything," I rush, "I like everything."

"I believe you," he mutters softly. "There must be something wrong with you, but I believe you."

"There's nothing wrong with me," I insist, caressing his face, his golden eyes waning, "but there is something wrong with you if you doubt your value."

He grins weakly. "There's definitely something wrong with me."

"At least it's not your pretty face."

"I must be feeling better, if you're teasing me again."

"Are you?"

He strokes back my hair, eyes glazed. "Mostly I just feel you…" He sighs. "I'm tired."

I swallow, pushing down the fear in my face. I can't keep him awake forever. "Sleep, then. Just make sure you wake up."

"If you insist," he returns. "You'll stay here?"

"For as long as you want me."

"I will always want you. That's the problem, really…"

He slumps beneath me, lapsing finally into unconsciousness, his breathing even but painful. I wait until I'm sure he's out, and then I wriggle away from his side and pry back the bandage. It's still bleeding. Still bleeding *a lot*.

If I don't close it, it doesn't matter whether or not the antidote worked, he's going to bleed out.

I go back to my room to collect the suture kit. Pan winds around my legs, and I take a moment to pick her up and breathe in the scent of her fur. *One, two, three. Inhale, exhale.*

"You can do this," I say aloud. "You can do this, you're fine. You're going to make *him* fine."

I put her down, pick up the kit, and go back to his room.

It's an awful, long, messy business, stitching up his side. His practise kit didn't bleed while you were working. He does. Profusely. The sheets are thick with it.

Eventually, I'm done. I wash his crusted blood out from under my nails, the skin of my hands etched with it.

I stare at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, at the pale, fragile-looking girl, her wide-eyed face surrounded by wild curls, damp with sweat.

Don't you break, I warn her. *Don't you dare break.*

I finish cleaning up and slide back into the bed, settling down beside him. I pin his limbs to the mattress, and to me, and pray I have the power to hold him there.

I lie beside him all night, watching him breathe and jerk, holding him, terrified he'll stop moving altogether. From time to time, he moves towards me, coiling his fingers into my clothes.

So I know he's still alive, that some semblance of consciousness exists inside him. He's alive. And in pain. And there's nothing I can do but be here.

Somehow, fitfully, I sleep, falling into a slumber not like rest. I dream I'm lost in the dark and someone's calling out to me, but I cannot find them.

A short while later, I'm yanked out of unconsciousness. Hades is still beside me, still, and impossibly cold.

I bark for more lights.

His entire body is white. Something like frost forms at his lips. His eyelashes are dusted with flakes.

My being freezes along with him. "Hades?"

He does not reply.

"Luliver!"

I shake him roughly, but his limbs are half-frozen solid. I place my head against his chest. His heart is still beating. He's still alive. He hasn't left me yet.

"Luliver?" I grab his face. "Tell me what to do. Please. *Please.*"

The dogs whine from the floor.

Panic slides to resolve. "Watch him," I command them. "I'm coming back."

I heap more blankets on him, although what they'll do to dispel the cold radiating from within, I don't know. I pull on my shoes, grab a cloak, and race to the armoury. I buckle on a dagger and crossbow. I barely know how to use either, but I figure it's better than going empty handed.

Before I leave, I dash to my room and scribble a quick message. I think carefully about my words, careful to avoid mentioning Hades at all, in case he's right about his mother wanting him dead.

In the end, I settle for just three words.

Help me,

Persephone.

I pray he's right, and that she'll come.

I head out into the Underworld, the great rocky caverns appearing more mountainous than ever. I only dimly remember the path to the podium, mostly having flown there with Hades. It's no short walk, and I need to conserve my energy, and be watchful for anything else that might try and stop me.

I am not prepared for this, and yet I must be. I cannot falter. I cannot let him die.

I take a deep breath, and plunge down the first tunnel.

I jog through the dark for thirty minutes, winding upwards towards the centre, mindful of noise, trying to filter through the low wail of the river, a sound that makes more sense to me than it did before. The sound of panic and dread and loss. The sound of my own soul.

I'm coming, I'm coming, hold on.

I take another turn, and realise that everything is starting to look the same. I don't know if I'm going in the right direction.

I emerge in a chamber above a pool. A goblin is by the edge of the water, trying to scoop up a spirit in his net. I don't have time to stop him, or the skills. I spin back, but a voice cackles.

"Human! Lovely, tasty human…"

I flinch, the split second costing me everything. I bolt for the tunnel, but a fist seizes my skirt and drags me to the floor. Pain smacks my knee, but I kick out with my good leg and collide with its parsnip nose, flipping onto my back as it reels, seething.

It spits blood onto the rock. "Human," it sneers, "kill the human."

I can't reach my crossbow. My dagger is tangled in my skirts. It's faster than I am, trained. I don't have time. It's going to kill me.

A spirit flaps in the water, grabbing my attention. "Hades!" I yell.

The goblin turns instinctively towards the noise, giving me the few seconds I need to free my dagger and ram it into his neck, driving it hilt-deep.

I've stabbed raw meat before, but never anything live. I'm unprepared for the resistance of jerking muscle, for the black gargle that rises from its throat as it tumbles backwards, eyes of peat staring at nothing.

It is still in seconds that last forever.

I killed it. I've never even killed so much as a spider before. Dad hated them. From the age of five I'd been scooping them and releasing them onto the roof garden. That's the sort of person I've always been, who tries to avoid violence.

And I killed it. I killed *him.*

I need to stop trembling. I need to get up.

His blood is on my fingers.

Get up. You need to get up.

I climb to my feet, hugging the cave wall, telling myself I don't have time for this, *knowing* I'll hate myself forever if I'm too late.

But I can't help it. The sobs crawl up my chest.

Stop it, stop it, stop this!

You can do it. You can.

You have to save him.

Don't be a coward.

But I *am* a coward. I'm a coward who's never had to do anything and who is lost and powerless and alone, and who's going to let someone die because she lacks the strength to stand.

"Lady Persephone," says another voice, cooler and calmer than the rasp of the goblin. I look up. It's the Ferryman, in all his terrible unglamoured state.

I don't care. I launch myself at his waist, sobbing into his rough parchment robes.

"Help me, help me, please!"

His bony frame tenses underneath me. "My Lady," he says slowly, "how may I assist you?"

"Take me to the transportation circle," I weep. "Please. *Please."*

He bends down and takes my elbows, lifting me upright. There is nothing in his expression that betrays anything, but for a moment, I think he plans to refuse.

His skeletal hand stretches out towards the water, and a longboat appears at the edge. "Come," he says, "we are not far."

We reach the podium not long after, and I drop my message into the flames with tentative,

trembling fingers, praying to whatever gods—old or new—might be listening.

Come. Please. Save him.

The Ferryman tilts his head. "You are not leaving?"

"I'm mortal," I say, "I don't even know how."

And I wouldn't go even if I could. Not without him. Not until I know he's safe.

"Take me back?" I ask. "Please?"

He nods, slow as the forming of ice, and directs me back to the boat. We row silently through the water, the low howling burning against my ears.

"Are you unharmed, My Lady?"

I don't know how to answer that. Physically, I'm unhurt, but I feel like something has scratched against my soul, and even if Hades is fine, even if nothing happens, the weight of this will tug a tiny fraction of my heart until the end of my days.

"Did Hades tell you to call me that?" I ask instead. "My Lady, that is."

"It's how he refers to you."

I wish that news could bring me some joy, but it does not, not right now, when I'm not sure he'll ever call me anything again.

We reach the shores outside the palace doors. The boat knocks against the stone, and I leap out of it. The Ferryman calls after me.

"My Lady?"

I stop, turning back to his blank, papery face.

"Take care. You are not safe. It is easy to trust the wrong person."

I'm not sure I trust anyone, not apart from Hades, although I trust that Emetria cares for him.

And I have to believe she will come, because the alternative is far too terrifying.

When I return to Hades' room, his bed is empty. Panic splits through me. Has he died? Do faeries disappear when they die?

But then I spy a tail on the rug behind the bed, and discover him there, sprawled on the floor, pale as milk with his arm around the dogs. They let out a whimper when they see me there, as does he when I reach out to touch him.

"Hades!"

"I didn't want… to go alone…"

"You're not going anywhere!"

I loop my arms under his, heaving his chest against mine, and haul him against the bed. He's still impossibly cold.

"The king of hell… freezing to death…" he groans, as I push his legs back under the covers, "what… delicious… irony…"

"You aren't freezing to death," I tell him, even when I know that's exactly what's happening. He's literally as cold as ice. Frost has cracked around his mouth. I reach out to touch his lips.

"I can… I can barely feel you…"

I swallow painfully, climbing back into bed with him and sliding under the covers. He's radiating cold. I have to stuff blankets between us to keep myself halfway warm, because I cannot let him go.

"But I'm here," I tell him. "I'm here."

"Keep… keep talking…"

I'm not sure what to say.

The dogs whine from the floor. "Get up, boys," I tell them. "Keep your master warm."

They leap up on the bed and settle down between us.

"Tell me a nice story," he asks. "Something from your childhood."

My childhood was full of nice things, but at the moment, it's hard to even find one. It's hard to think that I was ever happy, every good memory eclipsed by the torment of watching him suffer. I want to suck the pain away, and I can't.

So I find something, anything. Anything to tether him here, to get through the next moment.

"Every year on the first day of spring, my father used to take me to Hyde Park, no matter the weather, and we'd wash our faces in the morning dew. It's supposed to keep you pretty."

Hades smiles weakly. "It worked." He shudders. "What else did you do? At the park?"

"I don't know. Played on the swings. Had a picnic. Ice cream at the bandstand if it was raining. I used to kick up a fuss if it was drizzly, but it became one of my favourite traditions."

"When did you stop?"

"Dad decided I was too old one year, but… I went anyway. I don't know why."

"It's… it's a nice tradition…"

"I miss him."

"You'll… you'll be seeing him again… soon…"

"Stop talking like that!"

"I thought… I thought you wanted to go home…"

"But not if I don't get to see you again!"

He pries his eyes open at that, staring at me.

"You only get two days in the mortal realm a year, right? Can you… can you spend one of them with me?"

Something gleams in those eyes of his, an emotion I can't fully describe, a surprise I can't explain. For a moment, they're as bright as ever. "I'd spend all of….all of my days with you… if… if you wanted… wanted me to."

"I do want you to," I tell him. And then, hoping he understands, "I do want you."

I kiss his forehead, but the touch of his skin sends a sharp blast through my lips, a sensation that cracks against my chest.

"Sorry," Hades drawls, seeing my expression, "I'm not very pleasant right now."

"Is this a change from usual?"

"You like me really…"

"You know I like you. I–"

But he's drifted off again, and doesn't rouse when I call him. I'm forced to watch the slow rise and fall of his chest, petrified each movement will be the last.

He does know that I like him, right?

He isn't really going to die, is he?

There's a pounding at the door. The dogs bark. I scuttle out of bed, springing down the corridor to reveal Emetria, red-faced and white-eyed.

"What's wrong?" she asks.

I burst into tears.

Emetria sweeps into the hall, the door thudding shut behind her. She grabs my face, checking for any injuries, seizing my hands which are still coated in goblin blood.

"It's not me, it's Hades," I babble. "I think he's dying."

Emetria pales. "What?"

I pull away from her, back to his room. "He was wounded with something," I rush. "I don't

know what. He said it was poisoned. We tried to use an antidote but it wouldn't stop bleeding..."

Emetria crouches down by his side, examining the discarded vial and tearing the loose bandage off his wound. He moans beneath her fingers, not quite awake.

The dogs growl, but she snaps back. They fall silent in an instant.

"You stitched him," she says.

"I couldn't think of another way to stop the blood. Was that… was that wrong?"

She looks up at me. "You stopped him from bleeding out," she says, "but I think I need to open it again."

"What? Why?"

She places her fingers at the wound, drawing out a long, thin object from the basket in the crook of her arm. She puts an ear to it, listening inside his flesh.

"There's a shard inside him still," she deduces. "It's why he can't heal properly. It's poisoning him, freezing him to—"

"To death?"

The barest of nods. "We need to act quickly."

She starts laying out her equipment. Hades' eyes flicker open.

"Emetria," he says, half shocked, half horrified. "What are you—"

"I sent for her," I explain. "She's here to help you."

"You… you shouldn't… I don't want her here—"

"And I don't want you to die, so suck it up!"

Hades says nothing to that, but his eyes widen when he sees Emetria holding up the pointed end of her staff.

"No," he murmurs, "no, no, please—"

"It's to cut through the surface," she says. "Just the surface—"

"No, please don't—"

"I'll be as quick as I can," Emetria assures him, "I don't want to hurt you any more than I have to—"

"No—"

"Luliver, listen. I don't want to hurt you. I'm doing this to help you. I'm here to help you. Hold on to Sephy's hand, and endure it, just for a moment more."

Hades relaxes, only slightly, and I slide behind him, taking both of his hands in mine. He braces himself against me, but when Emetria applies the knife to his wound, the flesh starts to sizzle, and it's not enough. He nearly crushes my fingers, and I almost scream under the weight of his.

I didn't know people could scream that way.

"Luliver, look at me," I whisper desperately, my voice crackling. "Look at me, if you can. Don't think about what she's doing. Think about me. I can be naked, if you like. Or you can just think about the two of us curled up together at the end of the day. Think… think about rain. Think about the sound it makes on a roof. Think about sunsets and stars. Think about… think about…"

Emetria has slid a pair of tweezers into Hades' wound. He trembles under her touch, but he doesn't scream.

I can't find new words, so I sing something instead. Some old ditty, the first that comes to mind.

"You… really are not… a great singer."

"Oh, shut up."

"Don't stop."

Something pings in Emetria's tray. "I've got it," she says, glancing up at us. She applies

something liberally against the wound, thick and oily. It steams, but not in a bad way. The wound starts to close itself. She wipes her forehead with the back of her hand, leaving a smear of blood behind. His blood.

Hades sags against the pillows.

White light splays from her fingers, knitting together muscles and skin. It doesn't fully heal, not quite, but it looks like it happened days or even weeks ago. She finishes bandaging him and cleans up the mess, checking his pulse and reading something else with a strange instrument I don't recognise. She sighs, dropping his wrist, and marches into the bathroom to scrub her hands.

"Will he be all right, now?" I ask from the bed.

She does not respond.

I scramble out from behind him and follow her to the room. "Will he be all right?"

Emetria drains the sink. "I don't know. His body is still fighting off the residual poison. I can probably source something for that, but he's lost a lot of blood, too."

"But he can heal, right? That's how faeries work."

Emetria swallows. "We need our blood *to* heal. It's our energy."

"Can you do like… a blood transfusion?"

She looks down. "Not with my blood," she says. "Or yours. Faerie blood is different from human's. It needs to be a relative."

I pale. "Zera or Ares would never—"

"No, I do not believe Zera would," Emetria says, her jaw stiff. "I don't know how she'd explain her refusal to the court, but she would find a way. Ares, however… he might."

"He hates him."

"He's jealous of him, foolish and stupid as that may be. But I believe he does still see him as a brother." She pauses. "I'm not sure we have much of a choice."

"He'll hate us for this."

"He already hates me, and at least he'll be alive to hate me more. I'll pay that price." She turns around to face me directly. "Would you?"

"Anything," I say after a pause. "I'll do anything."

She shakes her head. "It does not mean much, when mortals say that, but all right." She steps out of the bathroom, crossing to her basket and staff. She places a vial of blue liquid on the bedside table.

"Give him that, if he wakes. I'll be back as soon as I can. Stay with him."

"Even if I could go anywhere, I wouldn't."

She stills. "I think you mean that. If you could go home right now, and not invite Zera's wrath, you wouldn't, would you? Why? Don't you want to go home?"

"Yes," I say truthfully. "But I couldn't leave him. Not like this." *Not ever.*

She nods, leaving the room, and I crawl once more to his side. He's not as ice cold as he was before, but that doesn't bring me much comfort. I lie against his chest and try to pretend he's holding me back.

For the first time in a long while, I dream of Dad. I dream of my old bed, and his huge hands stroking my hair, and telling me everything is fine. I surrender to the childish urge to hurl myself in his arms and sob. I suffocate under the weight of the world, choking on the scent of his jumper, on the familiar aroma of stale coffee and old paper.

I wake again to a frantic knocking at the door. I bolt down the corridor to answer it, and discover Emetria with Ares. I wonder how much convincing he took.

He grins at me. "Mortal," he says, "Emetria tells me my brother is at death's door. Are you

going to invite us in?"

I draw back, allowing them entrance and giving them a wide berth. Ares says very little when we arrive in Hades' room, although his expression flickers briefly.

"Blood, you say?"

Emetria nods.

"And what do I get out of it?"

"Your only brother returned to full health?"

He snorts. "I want a favour. From you—" he nods at her— "and you."

"Me?" I startle. "I'm mortal. There's nothing I can do for you and you can't hold me to it—"

"But I would like to have it anyway," he says. "There is still honour amongst your kind, isn't there?"

"Done," Emetria snaps. "Persephone?"

I purse my lips. "One favour," I agree, hoping to refuse him but knowing I'd give him anything anyway.

Ares smirks, and drags a chair to his brother's side. He unbuttons his shirt. Emetria pulls back the covers and rolls Hades onto his side. She takes a long silver object, something between a knife and pen, and draws something on his back.

Ares' smile flickers, settling on Hades' tattoo. No, not the tattoo. The wounds underneath it. He looks at Emetria, but she doesn't meet his gaze.

The scars surprise him. He did not know they were there. Which meant he didn't make them.

Emetria finishes carving the design on Hades' back and traces a similar symbol over Ares' chest. She places her palm to both, forming a line between the two of them. Ares' groans, stiffening as light brims beneath her palms, drawing something out of him and into Hades.

It takes longer than expected, but eventually, it's over.

"Rest for a moment," she tells him. "I shall find you something to re-energise."

She disappears from the room.

"So," Ares turns to me, "I can't help but notice you are definitely not glamoured, and not using this opportunity to try and escape. What's with that? My brother broken you so fully you're like a tamed pet?"

The dogs growl at this remark.

"Not that there's anything wrong with being that," he adds.

"I'm not explaining myself to you."

"Suit yourself. I'll never understand mortals."

"Much like I will never understand you."

"Faeries?" He raises a black brow. "Or me in particular?"

"If we hadn't agreed to the favours, you would have let him die."

Ares regards me carefully for a moment. "Certainly, he stands in the way of my ambitions, but letting him bleed to death… that wouldn't have been sporting. If I ever kill him, I assure you, he'll be armed."

"He's so lucky to have a brother like you."

"Why, thank you, I—" he stops. "That's a famed mortal lie, isn't it?"

I purse my lips. "Yes."

Ares does not look happy that I've managed to fool him, even for a moment. He glares at me, and I remember the power of his shove, of toppling back into the throne and having him lean over me.

I wonder if I've made a terrible mistake.

Emetria returns with a glass of wine and something hot and steaming for Ares. He takes them both, and she turns to me while he's occupied.

"Are you all right?" she asks.

"I'm fine."

She raises an eyebrow. "Your knee is bleeding."

"Is it?" I glance down. I'd completely forgotten. "Oh."

She sighs, steering me into a seat before fetching a basin of water. She cleans and dresses the graze. I can still barely feel it, although I'm fairly sure the bruising tomorrow will be worse.

After my knee is bandaged, she washes my hands, too, and fetches me a cup of something warm to drink. It's like firelight transformed into liquid, and turns my joints to syrup.

She leaves the room again, and I half-doze, sinking into the chair.

I think Hades wakes at some point, murmuring to Ares. His voice is weak, and I want to go to him, but I'm pinned in place by exhaustion.

"What are you doing here?"

Ares snorts. "Always the grateful one. I'm saving your life, apparently."

"Surprised you're not here to finish the job."

"It's tempting, but it wouldn't be sporting." He pauses, and his face goes darker. "I didn't know," he says, "about what Mother—"

"You didn't want to know."

Hades rolls over, and we both slide back into sleep.

I jolt awake when Emetria is gathering up her equipment, underneath a heavy blanket.

"He should be all right now," she tells me, meeting my eyes. "Lord Ares? We can leave whenever you're ready."

"I'm good to go." He rises from the chair, pulling his shirt back on.

"You're leaving?" I ask Emetria.

"Yes."

"Don't you want to… see he's fine for yourself?"

"I'm sure you'll take good care of him." She pauses. "Are you sleeping with him?"

"I'm… I'm sorry?"

"Are you sleeping with him? Earlier, you said he could think about you, naked—"

My cheeks feel hot. "It's not like that." *Yet.*

"Very well."

"I don't… I don't get it. You clearly care about him. Why don't you want to stay?"

"It's complicated," she replies. "Take… take care, Sephy."

She marches from the room, not looking back. Ares does, just for a second, with something almost like regret. He opens his mouth, as though to say something, but quickly shakes it away.

I rouse to someone stroking my hair, and shudder awake, the night, days, hours before rushing back with startling quality.

"'Sephone."

I turn to face Hades. He's lying beside me, arms outstretched, still pale, but brighter than before.

I seize his face, clutching it as tightly as I dare. "You're alive," I whisper, checking the colour in his eyes. They're bright and twinkly as champagne.

He grins at me, a real, true grin, not a spark of pain inside. "Disappointed?"

I launch myself into his arms, sobbing profusely against his neck. "You scared me."

Timid fingers reach up to clasp me into him, frail and hesitant but present and alive. "I'm sorry," he says shakily.

I tremble in his arms, spluttering on my tears. "You're all right."

"It seems so."

"We… we had to call your brother," I tell him. "I'm sorry, we had no choice—"

He freezes. "I thought I remembered him being here," he says. "Did he do anything to you?"

"No, not all at—"

"What did he ask for in return for his assistance?"

I swallow. "A favour," I say. "From Emetria… and me. Although he can't hold me to it so—"

He opens his mouth to speak, but I press my fingers to his lips.

"Don't. Whatever it is. It's done, you're alive, it was worth it. Don't say anything."

He sighs, falling back against the pillows.

I examine his face more carefully. "How do you feel?"

"Weak," he said. "Tired, still. Hungry."

"That's a good sign." I stroke his hair, but stop abruptly, aware of the intimacy of the action now that he's lucid. "I'll… get you some food." *And me too, while I'm at it.*

He groans as I shift out of bed. "If you must."

I get several paces across the room before realising he's trying to follow me.

"What are you doing? Get back into bed!"

"You commanded me to stay beside you. I *have* to follow you, until you order me to stop." He ought not to have the energy to look so wicked, but somehow, he manages it.

"Oh, er, well, stop."

"You have to say what to stop."

"I, er, um… Luliver Edelvard Lore, you do not have to stay beside me. I release you from that command."

"Almost a pity." He sighs, and then falls backwards. I just have time to steer him onto the bed before the strength leaves him.

He grins underneath me. "Are you going to kiss me again?"

"No," I say, hoping my glare hides my blush, "not yet."

"Well, that's a statement worth living for…"

I tuck him back in, and head to the kitchen, twisting the ends of my hair. With everything that had happened between now and the kiss, I hadn't had much time to dwell on what it meant.

You know what it means, says a voice instead. *You know what he wants. What you both want.*

But even if I do, does it mean I should act on it? Emetria's right. *Irma's* right. I'm mortal, he's fae. I'm only here for a few more months, and afterwards he can only step foot on mortal soil twice a year. This isn't the sort of thing that can have a future, not one longer than a few months.

I heat some soup and put together a tray for two.

You still have a few months.

I push open the door. He smiles at me wearily from the bed, and I remember what it felt like to almost lose him. I felt like I'd do anything to keep him here, and now that I have him back, I'm trying to think of excuses not to be with him? What's wrong with me?

He frowns. "Are you all right?"

I'm scared of wanting you too much. It's overwhelming how much I want you.

I inhale carefully, placing the tray beside his bed and sitting down in the chair Ares abandoned. It feels wrong to be so far away, but I'm afraid I'll shatter if I move any closer.

"Do… do you remember what happened when I first dragged you in here? What… what was said?"

"Yes," he replies.

"And… and what was done?"

"Yes."

"Right. So long as that's clear."

"Do you regret it?"

I freeze, just for a second. "Not a word," I say. "I just wish it hadn't had to happen that way." I hand him Emetria's vial. "She said to give you this."

He necks it back, pulling a face. "Foul. She probably left it to spite me."

"She cares about you."

He says nothing to this, but tilts his head. "What do you think of her?"

"I don't have much of an opinion if I'm honest, other than I know she cares about you… although she tried to glamour me into forgetting that we spoke at the Solstice. Your mark did its job."

"Evidently."

"Ares tried after the party, too, actually. But it didn't work."

He frowns. "My mark should have worn off by then."

"That's what I thought, but I wasn't wearing my necklace and I can still be glamoured—*you* were able to glamour me the other night."

He smiles, no doubt remembering what was said. "I am exceptionally good at glamours."

"Even when half-dead?"

"Perhaps you're easy to charm."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Maybe you're developing a resistance, but it lets you be glamoured if you're willing."

"Can that happen? Developing a resistance?"

"It's not unheard of, with certain mortals, or those that have been glamoured before a great deal."

"Which I haven't. Maybe the underworld is rubbing off on me."

"Or the other way round."

I frown.

"It's better here, with you in it."

I blush furiously, and snatch up the soup to have something to avert my gaze with. I almost inhale it; I can't remember the last time I ate. Hades takes up his bowl, looking at me gingerly.

"Have I made you uncomfortable?"

"No," I say, wiping my chin. I get up to wash my hands. "Yes," I say from the bathroom, glad he cannot see my face. "I'm just… I'm a little overwhelmed. See, everything in *my* life is better with you in it, too, and I really, *really* like you. In a terrifying, falling off a cliff kind of way. Is any of this making any sense?"

"Yes," he says, "because I'm terrified by how I feel for you too."

I turn around, and he's right beside me. "You should still be in bed."

"Lie down with me. We don't have to talk about anything, not if you don't want to."

I nod, my throat completely dry, and he guides me back towards the bed. I lie down, my hands sliding along his spine, and he tenses when my fingers accidentally skim one of his scars.

"Do they still hurt?" I ask him.

"No," he says. "I just have never let anyone touch them before."

I draw my hand away, but he catches it and caresses my palm with his thumb. "I don't mind if it's you," he says.

I want to kiss him so badly again it aches, but I feel like we'd explode, like I'd shatter his healing body with the force of it, and there are still questions I have, still things I have to say.

"I… I don't want to force you to talk about things you're not comfortable with, but… I hope you want to talk about them with me." I take a careful breath. "The scars on your back. Your mother gave those to you, didn't she?"

Hades turns away to stare at the ceiling. "Only when I really, really disappointed her."

"Hades—"

"I never told anyone. Emetria knows, I think. But I've never *told* anyone."

I lean towards him, taking his hands in mine. "Because you feel ashamed."

A tiny, imperceptible nod.

"Even though you know that you shouldn't be. That *she* should be."

Another nod.

"Because it says a lot more about her than you. It says nothing about you."

Another.

"And you know you didn't deserve it."

He stills.

"Hades?"

"There's… there's a difference between knowing something, and feeling it."

I reach across, kissing his hands.

"I hope one day you feel it as keenly as I do." I kiss his cheeks. "You have deserved none of the bad things in your life, and all of the good."

He thumbs my fingers. "Not quite all of them."

It's no good. I close the gap between us, sliding my hands against his cheeks and slamming my mouth against his. He balks slightly, as if I've caught him completely off-guard, and then softens in seconds, his lips warm and live beneath mine. His arms gather at my waist, pulling me closer, fingers stroking against the curves of my nightdress.

I've been wearing it for what feels like days. I don't care. My fingers coil into his hair as the kiss deepens into something that feels like wildfire.

I've kissed a fair few people before. I've never felt anything that comes within a fraction of this kiss. It's almost painful, like flames darting within inches of your skin, and yet I want to dive into the fire.

Instinctively, I roll onto his lap, sliding my legs either side of him—

He lets out a sharp moan, and I bolt backwards.

"Sorry! I didn't think—"

"Totally worth it," he rasps, clutching his side.

"I know you're not lying, but the face is unconvincing."

"I'll be completely fine… in a little while… maybe a day or two." He groans, lying back against the pillows. "I finally get you to like me, and I *still* have to wait to kiss you."

I laugh. "Finally? We haven't actually known each other that long."

Hades pauses. "I've liked you since the moment we met."

"What? But… it was a really strange meeting!"

"It certainly was. Don't ask me to explain what it was, not just yet, but…" He swallows, staring up at the ceiling, one hand still clutched to his wound. "I thought I was going to die," he says. "It's not the first time I've thought such a thing. It was just the first time I really, truly, didn't want to. The first time I felt I had something worth living for. At the same time, it didn't seem to matter. It didn't matter *because* you were there. I looked death in the face and said it could have me, as long as I got to kiss you. As long as you cared, it didn't matter. You were the most important thing in the world to me." He pauses. "You've *always* been the most important thing in the world to me. 'Sephone, since the moment I first saw you, I—"

I creep across his chest and place a delicate kiss on his lips, soft as I can muster. "I know," I tell him, lying down next to him. "It's all right. I feel the same."

"You don't," he says. "You can't. But thank you for your radiant lies, beautiful mortal goddess."

I dream it's the first day of spring, and Dad and I go to the park. I'm six or seven. I offer my ice cream to a sad little boy with the fluffy black wings of a duckling. I read him *Peter Pan.* The other kids tease him for his wings so I throw sand at them.

"Sephy! That isn't very nice!" says a voice I don't know, only in the dream, I *do* know it. It's Daphne's voice, *Mum's* voice. I look up and find her scowling, bouncing a baby in her arms. My little brother. The one I hoped I'd have if she came back.

"They were teasing, Luliver, Mum!"

"Let him be teased," says a voice like ice, and I turn to see the the faerie queen perched on one of the swings. "He was born to be broken."

The scene changes. The children morph into goblins and imps, their features twisting into something hideous. Nature claims the park, snaking over the climbing frame, the swings, the tunnels. It ought to be beautiful, but it feels as dark as a graveyard.

The creatures scramble towards Luliver, yanking at his feathers, tearing them out and throwing them to the ground. Blood splatters the grass, and it withers to dust and ash. The air turns grey, and the boy screams.

Panic blasts inside me. I want to help him, but I can't. A golden rapier appears in my grip.

Zera laughs. A high, cruel sound. "You can't use it," she says. "You'll never really be one of us. You were born to die."

I jerk awake, Hades is leaning over me. I fell asleep in his bed again. "Are you all right?" he asks.

"A nightmare," I tell him. "Kids were being mean to you. Also your mother may have destroyed the world."

He snorts. "Priorities, Sephy."

"No," I say, leaning up to give him a quick peck on the lips, "that sounds about right."

He looks utterly baffled by the sentiment, and I use the distraction to roll him back over and check on his wound. The surface has healed, leaving only a scar behind, but the skin around is still puckered and red.

"How do you feel?" I ask him.

"Like I'm being straddled by a beautiful woman—"

"That is not an answer."

"I really need to go out there again—"

"Not an answer either. And if you go out there and get hurt again because you're not able to defend yourself, I will kill you myself."

He blanches.

"That's a lie, Luliver. That means I care about you."

"Right," he says, as though not entirely convinced.

"So, I repeat, *how do you feel?"*

"Fine," he pouts, relenting, "a little tired still. And like… I can't move all that much."

"Another day in bed for you," I declare, pulling up the blankets and scrambling out myself.

"Will you not stay with me?"

"I'm going to have a shower. I'm disgusting."

"No, you're not."

I shake my head. "Those are some adorable rose-tinted glasses you're wearing, but I'm having a shower."

"I could do with a bath…"

"You'll drown yourself, in your present state."

"Not if you come with me."

I wheel around to hide my blush, wishing I'd slept in more than my petticoat.

"Sephy?"

"*Fine,*" I say, "but we're not going in completely naked."

He sighs. "I suppose that's fair," he says. "Completely naked, you wouldn't be able to resist me."

I squeak. He raises an eyebrow. "So, I'm a virgin," I say. "Just… putting that out there."

His eyes widen, just a fraction. "You and your boyfriend never…"

"That is what virgin means…" I breathe carefully, shaking my head. "We weren't together that long, and we were young. Sneaking around parents is difficult too. Neither of us were quite ready, and it fizzled out before anything changed in that regard."

"You don't have to explain—"

"I want to. I want to tell you everything."

He pauses. "I want to tell you everything too." He looks away for a moment. "We need not do anything, if you feel remotely uncomfortable—"

I lean across and kiss him. "With you, if it's ever uncomfortable, it's the good kind. The new and exciting kind. Now, give me a few minutes to run the bath and sort our breakfast."

He grins. "The bath is already running."

"Stop wasting your magic! And we still need breakfast. Do *not* summon that!"

"As my lady commands…"

We sigh mutually, for decidedly different reasons, and I leave the room to rustle up some breakfast. I deliver it to him, taking a few bites myself as I'm checking on the bath, before doubling-back to my room to feed Pandora. She yowls for attention, and I give her a few minutes of it while brushing my teeth and changing into a petticoat that I haven't been wearing for several days straight, fully aware that I'm going to get it wet in a short while.

I brush my hair too, but I think that makes it worse.

I check on the bath. It's nearly full, so I head back to Hades' room. He's leaning against the wall. I duck under his arm, taking some of the weight from his side.

He smiles. "Anyone ever told you you're quite strong for a mortal?"

"No," I say, laughing when I think of all the times Libby has beaten me. "I think, unfortunately, that's more a reflection of your current weak-ass state."

"Well, that hurts a little." He tries to suppress a groan as I tug him from the room. "Did you change?"

"No."

I'm not sure whether he believes me or not, if he's grown used to my ability to lie or so used to people being unable to that he doesn't question it. We hobble along to the bathroom. I lower him in

first and then sit to slide myself in.

Hades grabs my leg before I do, his eyes wide. "What happened to your knee?"

I guess my old petticoat was longer, or I've spent far too much time in his bed of late. "Oh, I fell when I went to fetch Emetria."

"That was days ago!"

I stare at him. "You really have no idea how long it takes for mortals to heal, do you?"

He shakes his head.

"We scar *really* easily." I lift my foot out of the water, pointing to a circular scar at my ankle. "Fell off a bike when I was nine. Not even badly."

Hades glides his fingers to the scar, drawing my ankle to his lips, and kisses the spot. "Hideous bike."

"This one," I say, pointing to the faintest, thinnest scar across the back of my hand, "I got from Pandora when we first brought her home."

He raises my hand to his mouth. "I told you she was a vile beast."

"She is *not* a vile beast! She just has trust issues."

"You're too kind to broken things."

"That's because broken doesn't mean unfixable—"

He grabs my waist and yanks me into the water, pulling my lips against his. We sink to our knees, taking the pressure off his side, and I have to stop myself from diving on him.

"I don't want to hurt you."

"I wouldn't mind."

"I would." I pull myself backwards, steering him toward one of the ledges cut into the bath, and grab a towel from behind him. I apply it to his chest, wiping away the days of grime, sweat and blood that I haven't managed to expunge. He spills water over my shoulders, doing the same.

"Tell me more of your scars," he whispers.

"Umm, there's one on my thumb from a kitchen injury—"

He kisses it.

"A burn on my wrist."

His lips graze the spot.

I have a slight one on my thigh from falling out of a tree at ten, but I don't think I can *bear* to have him kiss me there right now.

"Is there one on my lips? I swear—"

He claims my mouth with his, his tongue brushing against my lips, and a heat rises deep within that is impossible to ignore. I let him pull me against him, sliding my hands around his neck and my legs astride his lap, gently pressing against him. I feel like I'm unravelling.

"Luliver," I breathe.

He moans into me, and suddenly there are no more words, just the giddy, wild, intoxicating heat of his skin against mine, his hands on my flesh, his lips on my neck.

"'Sephone," he purrs, but then his voice turns into a groan, and I realise my knee is against his wound.

"I'm sorry!"

"Don't you dare leave my lap—"

"Are you giving me orders, now?"

He stops. "No," he says. "Never. Playful requests, maybe."

"I'm not ready to sleep with you," I tell him.

He smiles, but only slightly. “Maybe I’m not ready to sleep with *you,* either.”

“What does that mean? Have you never—”

“I have,” he says, “but… there’s a space between virgin and expert. I’m not skilled in the art of love. And I’m afraid.”

I tilt my head towards his. “Of what?”

“Of disappointing you. Of being unravelled by you.” He draws my damp hair over my shoulder. “It’s too much, Sephy. It’s all too much.”

I kiss his cheek. “We can go slow. We have time.”

He kisses the pulse of my throat, his hand still against my hair. I draw back before we can lose ourselves again.

“Let’s do what we came here to do,” I tell him.

His lips do not leave my skin. “I am.”

I push him back. “No. Cleaning.”

“Fine.”

He crosses his hands over his chest, and it takes all of my resilience not to tickle him into laughter again.

Finally clean, I deposit him back in his room and ply him with blankets and food, before returning to my own. I towel my hair and dress myself properly for the first time in days, and then, without telling Hades, I creep outside the palace doors and wait by the edge of the river. I’m not foolish enough to pass over the bridge by myself. I wouldn’t have done it the first time if I wasn’t desperate.

I do not have to wait for long before the Ferryman arrives.

“Lady Persephone,” he says, bowing.

“He’s alive,” I tell him. “Thank you.”

“Think nothing of it.”

“Is everything OK here? Levels of goblins—”

“We’ve lost a few souls in the past few days,” he reports. “Our numbers of skeleton warriors are dwindling. We can hold for a few more days.”

“Right.”

“You should tell him to hire some actual fae,” he says. “They don’t need reassembling.”

“What makes you think he’ll listen to me?”

“I think you’re the only one he’ll listen to.”

I smile at this, but quickly drop it. “Who do you think was behind the poisoning?” I ask him.

“A pixie did it,” he says.

“So I hear. But aren’t they… don’t pixies usually come from the Seelie Court?”

“Pixies are one of the few that belong to both, some allying with the Seelie Courts, others under Valerian.”

“So it could have been anyone.”

He nods solemnly.

“What do *you* think? Do you think Zera wants him dead?”

He is quiet for a moment. “Yes.” His reply is slow. “I think she does.”

I can’t imagine what that must be like, to grow up like that, feeling that rage from the one person who was supposed to love you, protect you. I would much rather have no mother than one like that.

I have nothing else to ask the Ferryman, but an urge to return to Hades’ side.

“Thank you,” I tell him.

“Take care, Lady Persephone.”

I head back into the palace. Hades meets me at his door. “I heard you leave,” he says, the panic ripe in his voice as I yank him back to the bed. “Why did you—”

“I went to thank the Ferryman for his assistance the other day,” I rush, double-checking his injury. “I didn’t go anywhere.”

“Did he say anything about—”

“A few more goblins, but he and your fine skeleton warriors are handling it. Don’t worry.”

“If that’s a lie—”

“Don’t make me say any more,” I tell him. “Please. I don’t want to lie, but you *cannot* go out there yet, do you understand? I’m not sure you could even defeat *me*.”

He pins me down against the bed, rolling on top of me and spreading his wings wide. “I could take you.”

I press the wound in his side, wrap my legs around his middle and flip him onto his back, in a move Libby has practised on me way, way too many times.

His wings vanish.

“Are you sure?” I say.

Hades swallows, a grin sparking in the corner of his lips. I bruise my mouth against his before it can widen any further, and suddenly I’m crushed against his chest, inhaling him.

He tenses underneath me, live with pain, and I roll off him in a second, panting. The moan he lets out at my removal from his body is louder than his groan of pain.

“New rule,” I tell him, “You can’t leave this bed until you can make out with me without wincing.”

Hades smirks, pulling me back into the crook of his arm. One hand laces into mine, the other winding through my hair. I have never felt so much a part of another person, never once been so ludicrously unsure of where I ended and they began. It would be easier to divide flames in a fire.

“That is the hottest thing anyone has ever said to me,” he says,.“Ten minutes and we’re trying again.”

“Ten minutes?”

“We faeries heal fast.”

“But… ten minutes?”

“I think that’s as long as I can stand to go without kissing you.”

I bury myself in his shoulder to avoid letting my blush show, and he kisses the top of my head in lieu of my lips.

At least for ten minutes.

By the following day, Hades has mastered my challenge and while I’m still not completely convinced he’s wholly recovered, I know I can’t keep him wrapped up forever. I see him to the door

like an overbearing mother hen.

"Be as safe as you can. Don't pick too many fights. Rely on your warriors."

"I will."

"And… please consider recruiting actual live fae, who can aid you efficiently if anything *does* happen?"

He sighs. "If you insist."

"Good. Also, I made you something. Stay here." I rush back into the kitchen and come back with a lunchbox. "I made you lunch. But don't go expecting it every day. I am *not* a 1950's housewife, thank you."

He stares at the box in his hands, eyes glistening.

"Is it too embarrassing? Too cheesy? It is, isn't it? You don't have to take it. I'll keep it here."

I try to tug it back. Hades' hold strengthens. "Embarrassing? Are you kidding?" He summons a marker and writes *Persephone made this for me* across the top in a long, elegant hand. Why is everything about him so pretty? He couldn't even have ugly handwriting? "I can't wait to show the rest of the guys at work!"

"All one of them."

"My skeleton warriors shall chatter with delight."

"Because you will make them."

He beams, sweeps in for a final kiss, and disappears, taking the dogs with him.

I try to occupy myself with as many productive tasks that I can, including reading some of the books they'd probably make me read if I was still at school. I know it'll be impossible to sit my exams after missing months of school work, but I'm determined to do at least some of the work my forged results would require, especially as being down here no longer feels like the punishment it was before. Hades' offer to provide me with a free pass to university used to be the prize for enduring this experience, but now the prize is…

Him, frankly.

Oh dear, I really do have it bad.

The hours pass by in utter agony. I have no inclination to garden; it's too far away to hear him if he comes back. I spend most of my day making paper birds, which I fashion into a mobile and hang over his bed, inked with a few sweet nothings. It's the kind of thing I'm sure he'll appreciate even though I really hope he doesn't mention it. It's embarrassing how much I like him as it is.

It feels like days before I hear the door open again.

I bolt from the room and race into his arms, smashing into him so fast we fall into the wall. My hands fold around his neck and bring my mouth to his.

He tastes of chocolate and fire, like flames made solid. I want his kiss inside me.

Within seconds, he's kissing me back, lifting me into his arms and twisting round so I'm against the wall instead and he can pour his strength into the kiss. His tongue brushes against my lips. I'd moan if I had any inclination to part my mouth from his, but I can't. I need more of him.

His hands roam up my back, half clinging, half claiming. He murmurs my name against my neck. I feel myself dissolving under his touch, a puddle of what I was.

"Good evening," I say breathlessly.

He clasps my face, staring at me as if I'm a creature made of smoke and shadow, to vanish the minute he stops looking. For a long moment, he says nothing. Then, "You're perfect." His voice is filled with a strange, yearning reverence, that makes me tremble almost as much as his kisses.

"Even though I have terrible taste in wine, don't always say the right thing, hog the covers and occasionally burn dinner?"

"*Especially* because of those things. Otherwise I'd start to think you weren't real at all, that I conjured you up like a glamour."

The weight of his words echoes down the corridor, shocking me with their texture.

I kiss him again, soft and lingering. "Can a glamour do that?"

"No," he whispers, "but I would not be adverse to a little more convincing."

I trace tiny circles on the exposed flesh of his chest, my fingertips drifting upwards, sliding over his collar bones, tracing his neck, his nose, his cheeks, his eyebrows. His impossibly soft mouth.

I dig my fingers into his hair and pull him back to me, and hold him against my lips like I mean to stay there forever.

He jerks back, sliding me to the floor. "I need a moment," he says.

"For what?"

"You'll see."

He opens the door to the kitchen.

"Is this a sex thing?"

He darts back out, his eyebrows shooting up. "Not *everything* is about sex, 'Sephone dearest. And really, the kitchen?"

"Counter-top sex sounds hot."

"Counter-top sex sounds *uncomfortable.* And for our first time?"

"All right," I say, holding up my hands. "Let me know when you're ready."

He disappears, and I pace about the corridor, wondering what he's planning. I don't hear much movement. He must be glamouring things.

The door opens, and he tugs me inside. The table is laid out spectacularly, with a bouquet of paper roses and silver candlesticks burning atop a shimmering black tablecloth. Faint music plays in the background, and the entire room is coated in a warm, heady light.

"It's beautiful."

"Mostly glamour, I'm afraid," he says. "Although I've been working on the roses for a while."

"I love them." I turn towards him, and am halfway to saying I love something else when I catch the nervous look in his eyes. "Are you all right? I forgot to even ask about your day. Was it all—"

"My day was fine," he says. "It's not that, it's…" He takes a deep breath. "I know this is probably going to sound ridiculous as we ought to be beyond such labels and I know it's certainly not forever and that dating opportunities are somewhat thin on the ground for us both and therefore this is perhaps an arbitrary question but…"

"Spit it out."

"Would you be my girlfriend?"

It's such a silly question, but not for any of the reasons he's mentioned. It's silly because he looks *nervous,* when he has absolutely no need to be because how can he not know what my answer is?

"You're laughing," he says, "why are you laughing?"

"I'm not! I'm not, I swear—OK, maybe a little."

"Did I say it wrong? I can—"

"No, no! You said it fine. I just… I never… no one says it like that, you know."

"They don't?" he frowns. "How did your previous boyfriend ask?"

"Hmm. He asked me if I wanted to go out with him, I said yes, we made out at the back of the cinema, and that was that."

Hades stares at me. "I have been lied to by everything I have ever watched and read."

"That's all right," I say, lacing my fingers into his, "I like your way better." I lean up to kiss him, drawing my arms around his neck.

"Is that a yes?"

"What? Oh God, yes! Yes of course. I will be your girlfriend, Hades, even though that sounds like a ridiculously small word for what we are to each other."

Hades grins, and kisses my neck. "We can come up with other words later, if you prefer. There are some very nice celtic terms, some fitting middle-English ones. *Hertis root,* 'the root of my heart', *culver,* 'dove', *heart's gleam*, *Mo shíorghrá, 'M'fhíorghrá*…"

With each word, he places a kiss at my throat, and I stop caring what each one means. I love every sound, every caress, but I want nothing more than his touch. I wrap my legs around him and he lifts me against the counter. I clasp him to my body, dragging my lips to his and kissing him so deeply I could drown. Hades moans into me, his hands moving up my sides, stopping at my back, where he clings onto me like I'll fall away at any moment.

I draw back, just enough to speak. "You can touch me in other places, you know."

He gulps. "Which… which ones?"

"Anyones you like," I say, grinning as I slide my mouth back against his, savouring the look of stark bewilderment in his face.

"Dammit, Sephy, a man could break with wanting you."

"Just as well you have me, then." I kiss his neck. "And you'll always have me."

He groans, folding back into the kiss. It's a lie, of course, our clock is ticking. One day the mortal world will claim me again, bury him beneath me. But in this moment, it does not feel like a lie. I am utterly and completely his, and my heart and soul will remain beside him even when I am forced from it.

That night, when he tries to say goodnight at my door, I do not let go of his hand.

"Hades?"

"Yes?"

"Would you be all right to share my bed with me? Without… without letting things go too far?"

Hades grins, stepping into the room. He closes the door behind him with his foot. "Happily," he says. "How far is too far?"

"I want you to kiss me into utter oblivion and then curl up in my arms."

He sweeps me off my feet and drops me onto the bed, making a cage of his body. He began his kisses at my neck, murmuring against my skin. "As my lady commands…"

He dims the lights to almost blackness, and his kiss, his touch rumbles through me, picking at my core, threatening to ignite something deep inside. We're flint and tinder, sparking, combustible, endless and breakable all at once. His hands explore my skin and I inch my own over his, sliding to new places.

All of a sudden, he pulls back.

"I'm sorry," I rush, "I didn't mean to… did I do something wrong?"

"No," he says, "not you." A long pause stretches between us, and I wonder if I should touch him, or wait for him to explain. "I… I have something to tell you. A secret. Almost the last one."

"All right."

"Can you see me?"

"No." I try to quell my panic at the graveness in his voice. "Should we turn on the lights?"

"No," he says. "I need… I need you not to see me. Just for this."

My heart coils inside me, churning with terror. I know I'm not going to like whatever it is he says, but I have to listen. I have to let him speak.

"For the most part, sex is really common with faeries," he begins, his voice slow. "There are some that just aren't interested—Athena, for example—but the rest of them treat it like it's nothing. Eating. Done frequently and just as much of a meal. There's more than pressure to partake, there's just… assumption. Everyone's doing it.

"I lost my virginity at a revel. I was very young, and drunk out of my mind. I barely knew what I was doing, only that it was expected of me, that people were laughing and jeering me on. She was a lot older. Knew what she was doing. I didn't enjoy it. And then there was a moment when I *did* enjoy it, and then I felt awful for that, too. Disgusted with myself, as well as… everything else. There was no one, *no one*, I could talk to. After all, it was for fun, right? So if I didn't enjoy it, there must have been something wrong with me. I even remember the look in Zera's eyes afterwards, like she was... like she was proud."

I swallow, and I hope he isn't looking at me, because I'm absolutely sure my face wears an expression of pure murder. I want to kill that woman. I want to actually kill her.

"The thing is," he continues, "once you've done something like that, people expect it all the time. Party after party, women would force themselves on me. I tried to take a lover, hoping if I had a

constant partner, people would leave me alone. Only they didn't, not really, and I couldn't have a constant lover, because I couldn't be myself with them. I didn't *want* them.

"Then, one day, there was this mortal girl at a party. She looked so utterly terrified, glamoured just enough to keep her quiet, and I just wanted so badly to get her out of there. So I had her drink my wine and ferreted her away. I didn't touch her. I didn't do *anything* to her. I kept her safe and glamoured, telling myself I'd just keep her for a few days and send her back with someone half-trustworthy on the solstice, which was a week away. Then it came, and Ares had her dragged out… He tried to glamour her into doing something, and it was a bit too much, and she just broke and started sobbing and screaming so they all thought I'd done something horrific to her.

"And after that… the women at court started to skirt around me, leaving me alone. I encouraged the rumours. I took more mortal women, glamoured them to speak unspeakable things, to scream all the while feeling nothing at all. It inflamed my reputation. But it kept me safe. No one came near me. I didn't want *anyone* near me." There's this hard, raw pain in his voice, and something inside me cracks under the weight of his words. "Anyone except you, Sephy. It's always been you."

He is quiet for a long moment afterwards, his breathing hard. My voice has dried up completely.

"Say something," he begs.

I inch forward on the mattress. "Can I touch you?"

"Yes."

In the darkness, I find his face. His cheeks are wet, and kiss away his tears before finding his forehead and leaning mine against it. "I'm sorry," I say, "I'm so, so sorry."

"I… I'd say it was all right, but…"

"I know," I whisper. "I know."

We kiss gently, briefly. "I want you," he says, "but I've never had sex with anyone I've wanted before, and it terrifies me. It's all the pressure and nerves of the first time along with…"

"Some pretty serious emotional and physical baggage?"

He breathes carefully. "Yes."

"Is… is there anything I can do?"

He swallows. "Keep being your delicious, wonderful, patient self?"

"I can probably manage that."

I kiss him again, and we lie down together. He falls asleep in my arms, cheek pressed against my stomach, curled into me. He is all at once impossibly large and smaller than I have ever seen him. How could this boy ever have appeared terrifying to me?

How was I ever going to let him go? Saying goodbye this morning was bad enough.

Let it burn out, I pray silently. *Let it run its course, fizzle away, stop growing. Don't let me want him so much when the time comes to say goodbye. Don't let me—*

Don't let me love him even more than I already do.

Neither one of us sleeps alone after that night, we stumble into whoever's bed is closest and sink into the softest, sweetest of slumbers. Sometimes he's so exhausted after a day patrolling the Underworld that he can manage no more than a few kisses before he's spark out in my arms, sometimes falling asleep before he can even remove his boots.

My days are dull and endless and frustrating, and I worry about him constantly, but my nights are blissful.

I think his are, too.

And there are no more nightmares, at least not for him. Several times I dream that he's lost and hurt and I can't find him, and I have to wake myself to remind myself that he's there.

One night, we lie in bed and I trace the faint line of the Mark of Hades on his wrist. "Have you chosen a successor?" I ask him.

"No," he says. "There was never anyone I trusted enough."

"So, if you die…"

"It goes to whoever kills me."

I try not to freeze at the thought, forcing a smile instead. "What if you drown in the bathtub?"

"I guess Zera would be able to choose the successor."

"Aren't you keen to avoid that from happening?"

"I didn't really care much about what happened to the world without me in it," he says, and strokes a finger down my cheek. "Not until recently."

"You… really need to make some more friends."

He nuzzles my neck. "Got you."

"One friend is not enough!"

"It is, when they're you."

But I'm going to leave, eventually. Too soon. And I don't want you to be alone. I can't bear it.

He glances up at me. "You're tensing. Is there something wrong?"

"I don't want you to be alone when I'm gone."

He shifts up on his elbows. "We have months—"

"It isn't enough."

A smile ghosts his cheeks. "On that point, I can certainly agree. But you can't stay down here forever, can you?"

"No," I say quietly, "I can't. No matter how—"

He raises an eyebrow.

"Never mind," I say quickly.

"'Sephone—"

"I don't want to talk about it." I lie down and bury my face in the pillows. Hades sighs and joins me, not quite touching. "I said I didn't want to talk about it, not that I don't like you anymore. Put your arms around me!"

He laughs. "Work, work, work."

"You love it."

"You're right," he says, "I do."

Waiting for Hades day in, day out, soon grows exhausting. I feel like a trapped housewife, devoid of anything truly meaningful, the feeling of contentment only scraped out whenever my other half is home. No amount of studying or gardening or ridiculous arts and crafts helps bridge the gap that chasms each time he leaves.

I feel helpless, like I'm sending him off for war, and I hate that I can't find something useful to

do.

How did anyone manage it, the waiting?

One night, he's late home. I eventually hear a knock at the door, and find a skeleton warrior with a hastily scribbled note.

Not dead. Dealing with a small cave-in. Try not to worry. I'll be back as soon as I can be,

Hades.

I fold the note away in my drawer, and try to sleep. I get as far as treading it when he finally returns, sloughing off his extra clothes and shoes and crawling into bed with me. He slides his arms around my waist, and I turn round to face him.

"I can't do this anymore," I say

Hades freezes. "Be… be a couple?"

"What? No! Oh God, no. We're fine there."

He exhales, clutching his chest. "Stars above, Sephy, you panicked me there."

"Sorry! Sorry! I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine. What's wrong?"

"I can't just stay here, day after day, watching you go off to fight the fight. Standing helplessly by the sidelines isn't exactly my thing."

"But you're—"

"Mortal, I know. And pretty helpless. But I don't have to be."

He raises a black brow. "What are you suggesting?"

"Train me. Or… or let others train me. I might never be as strong as a faerie, but I'm pretty sure I can learn to take on a goblin or two." I pause, waiting for him to say something. "You're not allowed to tell me no. If you start the next sentence with anything like, 'I forbid it' you're an absolute jerk and I will leave you. You're allowed to be scared. You're allowed to be worried. But I almost watched you die and every time you leave I'm worried that it will be the last time I ever see you and I refuse to live like that."

He swallows. "All right," he says.

"All right?"

"Yes. I'll contact Irma, see what she suggests, so you have someone to practise with while I'm not around. You're right. I'll be terrified out of my bleeding mind the entire time you're out there, but it's only fair."

"It certainly is, after the absolute hell you put me through. I may never forgive you for nearly dying on me."

I laugh, but Hades doesn't return it. He is completely still.

"Is there something wrong?"

He sighs. "This might sound ridiculous after what you just said, but I need to know… Is this just a passing dalliance for you? A sort of… pleasant indulgence? A nice way of passing the time? Because it isn't for me. There's nothing passing about what I feel for you. More of a, I'll-remember-you-for-the-rest-of-my-immortal-life, etched-into-my-soul kind of feeling. I might forget your face or the smell of your skin, but I won't ever forget you, first and final dream of my heart."

His words hit me like water against a burn, painful and soothing all at once.

"You think you're just a passing *dalliance* for me?"

"Maybe," he says, "I don't know. I only know you can say things you don't mean, even without *meaning* to, and I never know if you're serious or joking or what you really feel—"

I stop his words with a kiss. "I love you," I tell him.

He pauses, as if he can't quite believe what I've just said, and the words will vanish if he speaks again. Or perhaps he was expecting something grander, a great declaration. Perhaps the world should shudder and shake with the weight of them, but in this moment, they don't feel like they're monumental. They're easy and natural, as right as the earth and air.

"I love you, too," he says, and bends down to kiss me in a way he never has before, with some strange, trembling force, not unlike pain or release. His lips groan against my mouth, and for a second, I think I feel something wet against my cheek.

I don't look, pouring myself into the kiss, into him, the room fading into milky, blissful blackness.

I awake in the morning, my ceiling brandished with pink, golden dawn, tied up in Hades' arms. He's stroking back my hair.

"Good morning," I whisper.

He kisses my brow. "Good morning."

"Were you watching me sleep?"

"One of my favourite pastimes."

"Can't think why."

"You watch me sleep."

"You're prettier than me. I drool. And my curls go *everywhere*."

He laughs, and to prove my point, I yank out my hair from underneath him. I really need to start plaiting it before bed. I comb it through with my fingers, Hades watching me intently.

"Did you mean it?" he asks.

"Did I mean what?"

"When you told me that you…"

"That I loved you?"

"Yes."

"Why else would I say it?"

"I thought, maybe, it was an accident, the sort of thing that slips out in the heat of the moment. Mortals say all sorts of things they don't really mean."

I sigh. "Slightly insulted. We need to work on your trust issues. Have I ever given you a reason to doubt me?"

"No, but—"

"Then don't. Just trust me."

He swallows. "I trust you," he said. "But I don't trust..."

"What?"

"The world, I suppose." He looks down. "You saying that was too much like a good thing. And good things don't have a habit of being real. Not for me."

It's hard to be mad at someone when they say things like that.

"I'm real," I tell him. "And I do love you. I think I truly fell for you when you made Christmas for me. I wanted so badly to kiss you, so many times, that day. I thought you were wonderful. I couldn't believe anyone would go to all that trouble for me."

"I'd do a lot more, for you," he assures me.

"When… when did you fall in love with me?"

He pauses. "It's difficult to say," he says. "But certainly, I loved you by the Solstice. I was so utterly afraid for you, and you… you seemed afraid for me, too. If I didn't already know how kind you were, I truly felt it then. I dared to believe that perhaps you didn't hate me. And then at Christmas, when you looked so *happy,* I thought that maybe I had something to offer you. That my affections weren't utterly one-sided or hopeless."

A strange warmth spreads through me, like I'm seeing this vision of myself through his eyes. I want to shake with happiness, utterly elated, completely giddy with the sensation that he loves me, that he seems to have loved me from the start.

But I'm pinned back from my elation by the twinge of sadness in his voice, the stark reminder that he believed himself so incapable of love he'd thought I'd hated him.

"I never hated you," I say. "Not even at the start. I was angry I was trapped here, but once I realised you had done it to protect me… I was so confused. And then when I started to realise why…" I shift up to hold his face, thumbing silvery tears. "You are good, and sweet, and wonderful, and I'm almost terrified of sharing you with anyone else, because it seems so impossible to me that no one else has seen your heart for what it is. I almost can't believe you're mine, that you want *me,* because you should be able to have anyone."

"No one but you has ever wanted me."

"Then the rest of the world are idiots."

"I can agree to that." He kisses me. "I want to tell you something. I want to tell you *everything."*

"Do it, then."

"I cannot," he says, "there are some secrets I cannot speak, however much I want to. But I want it known that I would share everything if I could, and everything I *can* share is yours. Truly. For as long as you want me, I am yours."

"And what if I want you forever? For the rest of my short, mortal life?"

"Then you shall have me until your heart ceases to beat."

The weight is so much more when I know he cannot lie, when he means every word he says.

And yet, buried in that confession is another thought, a painful choice, the reality that this cannot be forever, that I must return, and he is only allowed to set foot on mortal soil but twice a year.

But I shelve that fear, that worry. It is not today's decision.

Today, he is here, and so am I.

The following afternoon, when Hades is still out on patrol, Irma arrives at the doors. She grins at me gleefully.

"So, I've been informed you want to learn how to fight?"

"You?" I say, before I can stop myself.

She bristles. “What, you think because I’m an imp I can’t fight?”

“I didn’t say that.”

She breezes past me. “I’ve never trained a mortal before,” she says. “This should be interesting.”

‘Interesting’ is not the word I would use. Training with Irma is even more exhausting than dance practise. For the better part of an hour, she runs me absolutely ragged in the armoury, testing my speed, strength, endurance.

She is not particularly impressed.

“Mortals are so *weak,*” she concludes. “I suppose your reflexes aren’t bad, but are you sure you want to do this?”

I nod from my puddle on the floor. “I can’t just stay here, day after day, and not do anything while he’s out there.”

“He’s been out there every day for years,” Irma says. “What changed?”

“Well, he got hurt and he—”

“He what?”

“He got hurt and—”

“Wait. Tell me the story.”

I do, recapping almost exactly what happened. Irma’s eyes blaze, just as the doors open. She blasts into the corridor and almost throttles him upon entry.

“You nearly *died* and you didn’t think to call me?”

“Um… sorry?”

“What were you thinking?”

“That you wouldn’t be able to help and that my mother would stop anyone from coming?”

“Hermes is *neutral,* you fool! I would have found a way! Honestly! You’d literally rather *die* than ask for help?”

“I had help,” he says, smiling at me.

Irma glances between the two of us and the mutual smile spreading across our faces. “Oh no.” She groans. “Something happened between the two of you.”

“Maybe,” says Hades, moving forward to wind his fingers into mine.

“This won’t end well.”

“Maybe not, but at the moment, it’s going fabulously.”

She rolls her eyes. “Children.”

Hades draws me into his arms. “How are you? She didn’t run you too ragged?”

“I’m going to collapse.”

He sweeps me off my feet. “Bath?”

“Bath.”

“I’ll help myself to food, shall I?” says Irma.

“Yes,” we both answer at once, as he carries me away.

I can’t quite pinpoint a moment in time where the training starts to feel easier. My body quits aching perpetually after the first three days, but Irma merely ups the exercises, progressing me from

‘simple’ running and muscle-building to holding actual weapons, trying to find something I have an affinity for. Most of the swords are far too heavy, it turns out I have terrible aim with the bows, but I quite like the whip for keeping foes away from me, and the dagger for when I can’t.

Irma can conjure some convincing illusions, but they can’t touch me. There’s no way of testing my skill against a real opponent.

“I’ll bring you back a goblin when Irma thinks you’re ready,” Hades says one night, as we settle down to bed.

“You say the sweetest things.”

He massages my shoulders and kisses my back, and we sink into exhausted sleep.

Irma can’t stay all the time. She frequently disappears back to the surface, leaving me with a long schedule to work through in her absence. I am simultaneously aware that I’m getting better while being absolutely clear on how far I have to go. I dedicate every spare hour to practising, but there’s only so far I can push my body.

But I *am* getting stronger. I am.

One day, Hades surprises me by coming back for lunch and finds me practising lunges. He grins, flicking a dagger from his own waist, and marches across the room.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“Disarm me.”

“What?”

“See if you can disarm me. I think you might be fast enough.”

Disarming was one of the first things Irma taught me, but disarming him will be another matter altogether, when strength plays such a vital role. Not to mention he’s way faster than I am. Way faster than I could ever be.

Nevertheless, I humour him, taking a few lunges that he dodges easily, darting behind me like a creature made of smoke.

He cackles.

“You’re enjoying this.”

“I absolutely am.”

I take another swipe at him, knowing I’ll reach nothing.

“Not bad.”

I really am going to stab him. “*Why* are you enjoying this?” I lash out.

He appears behind me, planting a quick kiss on my cheek, swift and sure as an arrow. “I like being the powerful one for once.”

“*I’m* the powerful one?”

“Only in the sense that you terrify me.”

I snort. “Be serious.”

“I can’t not be. You *do* terrify me. I’m terrified by how utterly besotted I am with you.”

“Yeah, well, feeling’s mutual, trust me.”

“Are you sure? Because you really look like you want to stab me.”

I smile, taking another lunge, and wait for him to appear behind me. The moment he does, I drop my dagger, elbow him in the side, grab his arm, and flip him over my shoulder. I offer a silent thanks to Libby for teaching me that move as I straddle him and yank the weapon out of his hand, tipping it under his chin.

There’s no way I successfully disarmed the Lord of Night. I narrow my eyes, keeping the dagger pointed at his jaw. “You let me win.”

“Perhaps,” he says, with a sinful smile. He grabs my thighs and flips me onto my back, unfurling his wings so that we’re cocooned against the floor. He kisses my neck. “And I have every intention of doing so again.”

He stops abruptly, pulling back, as if noticing something disgusting on my face.

“What? What is it?”

“Nothing,” he says, shaking his head. “For a moment there, your eyes looked a bit different. Doubtless it’s the light.”

“Were they pretty?” I grin.

“Everything about you is spectacular.”

I wonder what they looked like, why they made him freeze, but he couldn’t say it was nothing unless it was fine, and after a few more kisses, I forget to ask.

The next day, with Irma still not around, Hades takes me off into the Underworld with him.

"It's been quiet, of late," he tells me. "But arm yourself, just in case."

I like the idea of being armed almost as much as I like the idea of being in his arms again, swooping through the valleys and caverns. It feels like forever since we've been for a fly.

Why does everything feel like it's moving so quickly, now?

We stop in one of the painted caves. It's older than the other murals I've seen before, depicting the ancient fae in the classic Greek robes that adorned the paintings and pots in my dad's study. It shows the origin of the gods, of five of them being regurgitated from Kronos' stomach after he swallowed them as newborns. Delightful.

It shows them returning to the mortal world, with Zeus reigning as king on Mount Olympus, and his brothers Poseidon and Hades taking dominion over the seas and the Underworld respectively.

I study their golden laurels.

"Forgive me if I'm wrong," I say, "but in the old tales, I'm fairly sure both Poseidon and Hades were styled as *king."*

"That is correct."

"But it's just 'lord' now."

"Also correct. Zera wanted to make it very clear who was in charge."

"Is Poseidon similarly bound to the ocean like you are to here?"

"He does not have the entire ocean; but he's able to travel between several pocket realms inside it."

"Kind of a sucky deal."

"Zera's speciality, although he doesn't seem to mind."

"I wish there was some way of…"

"Of what?"

"Of getting out of the deal, or at least that part of it. Of giving you and him the freedom you deserve—"

He leans closer. "Oh? For what purpose?"

"You *know* what purpose."

"I do, I think, but I should like to hear you say it."

"Because I want you. Because I don't want to say goodbye to you. Because it's the right thing to do—"

Hades closes the gap between us with such force that I'm knocked against the wall, but his hands rise up to cradle my head, cushioning the blow. He kisses me with such fierceness I don't know who's more at risk of breaking.

He grins when he parts from me.

"What was that for?"

"Because you're a good person."

"*You're* a good person."

He sighs. “No, I’m not. The best thing about me is you.”

“See, I think it’s the other way around. You seem to think I’m better than you because I’m nice to people, but it’s really easy to be nice when you’ve energy to spare, when you aren’t scared or hurt or afraid or hungry, when you’ve been loved and looked after your entire life. I look at *you* and think that I can’t possibly be good enough, because sometimes I think I’m one tragedy from becoming a supervillain, and you… you have every reason to hate everything and everyone and you *don’t*. You keep trying to do good even when the entire world has shown so little good to you.”

“I’m not nice to anyone other than you.”

“But that’s not true. You’re nice to the dogs. You’re nice to Irma. You’re even nice to the spirits, inhuman as there are. You’re nice to everyone and everything that hasn’t hurt you in some way. You even try to like my psychotic cat.”

“The world hasn’t been completely cruel to me,” he says, thumbing my cheeks. “It brought me to you.”

“I am not worth every bad thing in your life. No one could be worth that—”

“No one but you,” he assures me. “Every bad thing that has happened, every bad thing that will—”

“Don’t tempt fate—”

“If I’m with you, I don’t care what happens. The rest of the world can rot.”

I freeze, a sharp breath stuck in my throat. *He cannot lie.*

“See?” he says. “I am not as kind as you think. You couldn’t say that honestly, could you?”

“No,” I say, “but I can still feel it.”

I’m still connected to the world above, to Dad and Libby and my family, to the things and people that formed the foundations of my soul. I could live forever and never fully shake them from me. The tendrils of them will outlive their mortal coils, sinking into my skin, my flesh, my years.

But for a moment, a thin, fragile moment that exists at the press of his lips, the touch of his hand… I feel exactly like he does, as if nothing else matters.

Something clinks down the tunnel. Hades stiffens, sharpening upright.

“Stay here,” he whispers.

I draw my dagger and my whip. “In the words of my dear friend Libby, *yeah, no*.”

Hades shrugs off a smile and creeps down the tunnel. “Fine. Just stay behind me.”

This, as least, I stick to, standing way back as he folds into shadow, noiseless as the night. I catch a flash of something light and small, but before I can even lock eyes on it, Hades has grabbed it by the throat and smashed it up against the wall.

Blue skin and silver hair gleam in the low light, iridescent wings shimmer against the rock. A pixie. She kicks Hades in the stomach and bolts out of reach, wings trailing along the ground.

I lash out with my whip, catching her ankle and yanking her to the ground. The weight feels wrong, like she’s too heavy. She doesn’t yelp when I drag her back.

Something shimmers around her, like the shine of a bubble. Hades sees it too.

“You’re no pixie,” he says, pointing his sword at her neck.

“What are you talking about? I look just like one.”

He presses the tip of his blade to her flesh. “Release your glamour.”

“What do you—”

The metal burns against her skin, and she cries out. Hades’ eyes flicker at the sound, and I can tell just how much he doesn’t want to do this.

“Stop!” she screams.

Her blue skin melts to brown, her silver hair turning black. She increases in size, her thin arms turning dark and muscular, the armour of leaves replaced with leather and silver, stamped with the crest of an owl.

"I know you," says Hades. "One of Athena's lieutenants."

Her glare darkens. "If you know me, then unhand me. We are working for the same side."

"I doubt it," he snarls. "And you must too, to come here disguised as another."

"I come as my lady bid me. I'm searching for information about who sent the hydra."

He pauses, and I know in that moment he was sure his mother was behind it, and is reading into her words. It would be easy, of course, for either Zera or Athena to have sent someone on a mission without revealing their own allegiances.

"And what have you discovered?" he asks instead.

"Nothing," she reports. "The other creatures I've encountered down here have heard nothing about it."

"So Valerian didn't send it?"

She goes quiet, and we both read into that pause, wondering what she's keeping back, what she won't say.

Hades moves his sword towards her skin. "Speak, lieutenant."

"The goblins and other pixies down here..." she says, as if the truth is being dragged from her, "they aren't from Valerian's court. They're exiles. Solitary."

Hades' eyes flicker beneath this knowledge. "So anyone could have sent them."

"Yes." She grits her teeth. "Is there anything else you require, My Lord, or may I return to my post?"

"A few more things, first," he says. His voice is light, but the knuckles clutching his sword are white with tension. "I was ambushed by a group of pixies a couple of weeks ago. What do you know about that?"

"Nothing," she replies.

"What of any plots to murder me?"

"Not my orders, My Lord."

"And what orders *did* Athena give, regarding me?"

"That we were to avoid engaging you." She stiffens, clenching her jaw.

"Go on."

"We were to report anything we learned about you, should we cross paths."

"Ah," says Hades, sliding down beside her. He's trying to act casual, stroking a long-fingered hand under his chin, but his eyes are dark. I don't like this. I don't like it at all. "And what *would* you have to report, from today's interaction?"

Her eyes glance towards me, and she breathes carefully, conscious of the weapon so close to her throat. "That it seems strange to bring your ensorcelled mortal on patrol with you. That I heard you talking, and am not sure she's glamoured or unwilling at all."

Hades' eyes are almost devoid of colour. "Yes," he says, his voice hard, "I was afraid of that."

He pulls back his sword. "Wait!" I cry.

Hades turns his head, but doesn't meet my gaze. "I can't let her report that to Athena. I can't let Zera know about you. Even if she's not behind any of this, with that knowledge—"

"Don't kill her," I beg him. "She hasn't done anything. Get her oath, instead."

"She'll have given her oath to Athena. She doesn't have a choice."

"We do." I stare at the lieutenant. She's one of the few fae I've seen with eyes that could pass

for human. Brown-black, like the eyes of a bird. They could be Libby's eyes. Aunt Imogen's. "Give him your true name," I tell her.

Those same eyes turn venomous. "No," she seethes. "I am loyal to Athena—"

"And you can remain so as long as you live," Hades assures her, his voice softer now. "I will never ask another thing of you aside from this. But I cannot allow you to walk away with any knowledge that might harm *my* lady. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she says, her jaw tight. "I understand."

"Then do as My Lady bids, and give me your true name."

Her eyes blaze with anger. "Sierra Veradine Lye."

"Very well. Sierra Veradine Lye, you shall not report to anyone our conversation today. You shall not communicate it in any way, through any means. You shall forget the words we uttered. Do you understand?"

"I understand."

He draws back his sword, and she rises to feet, massaging her neck. "Your mother isn't evil, Lord Hades."

"You may believe that," he says. "But I don't."

She pulls back on her glamour, disappearing down the tunnel. It only occurs to me after she's departed that Zera likely already knows about me not being glamoured; Ares would have told her. But Hades didn't know that, and I stayed mute on the matter, not wanting to worry him further.

The two of us fly home in silence.

It isn't until we reach the door that I find the strength to speak.

"Who do you think sent the ambush?" I ask him.

He shrugs. "I do not know."

"Is there *any* chance that Valerian is behind this?" I know, whatever he said to that woman about Zera, that he doesn't want her to be behind it. That he would still take any enemy over her.

"He would not be the first king to use exiles to do his dirty work in return for pardons, and there are always ways of hiding true allegiances, but no." The words seem to pain him. There's nothing in his face, but I know. "I don't think he's sent anyone down here. He has so little to gain."

"But if Zera sent the Hydra, why would she have sent someone to investigate?"

"Covering her tracks, maybe? And Zera *didn't* send her. Athena did."

"Doesn't Athena work for Zera?"

"When you cannot lie, you are very careful who you share your plans with." He strokes my cheek, running a thumb over the curve of my ear. "Try not to worry," he says. "I won't let anyone hurt you."

"I'm not worried about *me,*" I tell him. "I'm worried about *you.*" *And how far you'll go to keep me safe.*

I want to keep him safe, too. But I'm not sure how far I'll go to do that.

He smiles faintly, kissing my brow. "I don't like worrying you, but it is nice to be worried about. Does that make sense?"

"Perfectly," I say, leaning against his chest, trying to forget how close he came to killing that woman, and wondering if that darkness exists inside me, and how far away I am from reaching it.

I awake in the middle of the night and find the lights too bright. I wonder if Hades has no idea of the levels he needs to keep them at to accomodate for my mortal eyes, and quickly dampen them. The clock tells me it's almost dawn, so I don't bother going back to sleep. I watch his face instead, and stroke Pandora who's curled up between us. Hades has his arm around her, and when I stroke her fur, she stretches out against his bare torso.

I can't say I blame her.

"Looks like you like him now," I say, kissing her head. "I get it, I like him too."

A hand reaches out and pulls me against him, soft as a ripple on the shore. "Just like?" he says, his eyes still closed.

"You know I love you."

"I could stand to hear it a few more times."

I kiss him gently, and his eyes brush open. His hands slide around my neck. "That's a sight to wake up to."

"One day you'll get bored of it."

"No," he says quietly, "I won't."

I kiss him again, longer this time, to distract from the growing sadness in his voice, and the loudness of my thoughts, the reminders that we shall never be together long enough to grow bored of each other.

I scramble out of bed and head to the bathroom, splashing my face. If the next few months won't be enough, how will the two days a year afterwards satisfy?

I will not move on from this. And I cannot conquer it.

There's a tear in the wall above the bath, like fractured wallpaper, but the tear is filled with pure, brilliant light. It looks quite pretty. I stare at it for a moment, waiting for something to happen, but I find myself instead wondering how I would decorate this room if I could glamour every inch of it. I'd have a huge floral mural over the bath, and the petals would be trimmed with gold. An ornate mirror would fill the space above the sink, and the bath would be a big, claw-footed one with fancy taps.

Hardly knowing what I'm doing, I lean forward to tug at the light, peeling back a piece of paint like the skin of a fruit. The entire wall fizzles away, replaced with the very mural I'd imagined. I trace my fingers over the rest of the room, and the old falls away.

"Hades—" I stick my head back into the room—"did you give me bathroom glamouring privileges without letting me know?"

He sits up abruptly, disturbing Pandora. "What?"

"The bathroom. Have a look."

He leaps up and joins me. "What… How did you do that?"

"I don't know. I just kind of imagined how I wanted it to look."

"This… you just glamoured it."

"I… no. I can't have glamoured it. Because glamouring it would mean I…"

Hades raises an eyebrow.

"But I'm human."

"It looks that way," he says, with a trace of regret. "You age like one. You *look* like one. But… you don't know who your mother is."

That old hope, half dread, rises inside me. "You think she might have been fae?"

He nods.

"No. No, that's ridiculous. Because that would be way too coincidental—"

"Is it? You don't remember where you got that necklace from. The one that dispels glamours."

"I—no." A market? A present from a relative? I *couldn't* remember.

"And you said that a goblin gave you an invitation? Maybe he did just pick out a mortal. Or maybe he recognised you as something else. Or maybe you came to us because something in your blood called to you."

I want to shake my head, but the more he talks about it, the more sense it makes.

My legs go numb. Hades grabs my elbows and steers me back towards the bed.

"Is there… is there a way to know for certain?" I ask.

"A test of some kind? I'm not sure."

"Because maybe there's another explanation. Maybe some of your power is rubbing off on me, or something."

He smiles weakly. "Maybe."

There's a bang on the door. "You kids up yet? I'm hungry!"

Hades sighs. "One moment, Irma." He turns back to me. "Are you going to be all right?"

"I… I think so."

"If you need me, I won't go out today."

"What? No. Go patrol."

"If you're sure—"

"Hades—" I catch his hands— "I'll be fine. I'm tough."

He smiles, kissing my forehead. "I know you are. One of the many, many reasons why I love you."

I want to ask him what the others are, to kiss him and list all the reasons I love him, too, but there's another, louder knock on the door.

"This bacon doesn't cook itself!"

"It literally does!" Hades barks back. "Give me a second!"

"Glamour yourselves unnaked and join me for breakfast!"

Hades holds out his hand. Neither of us *is* naked, but he glamours us both outfits anyway. I don't complain, he knows what I like better than I do. I'm going to hate changing this blue, flower-jewelled gown for training clothes in a bit.

"Come on," he says, "let's not keep her waiting."

All morning, I train like a demented beast, vaulting and lancing and running and climbing, trying to push my thoughts away. Even Irma struggles to look unimpressed.

"Someone had their fibre this morning."

"I'm feeling oddly motivated."

"Excellent. We'll break for lunch and start again."

After lunch, we pick up the weapons. My aim with the whip is improving, and I can *almost* do the 'twisty dagger move' where you flip them in your hands. Irma tells me it's completely unnecessary, but I disagree. I feel a bit like a glamour myself, like I'll be more of a warrior if I look like one.

"Far be it for me to complain that you're actually doing tolerably well," says Irma, "but you seem different today. Did you and he fight? Are you imagining each of the targets as his face? Because

if that works for you—"

"We didn't fight, I'm just—" I don't want to tell her about Hades' suggestion, but I want to know more about what I think is happening to me. "I read something last night that's bothering me," I tell her instead. "About half-fae. They were just referenced. I was wondering about them."

"Interesting thing to keep you so focused," she says curiously.

"Have you heard anything about them?"

"There's been a few, over the years. There used to be lots. Easier to breed with humans. Quicker. Didn't tend to be as powerful, though, which is why Zera forbade it a century ago. Said it polluted the line."

"Of course she did." I pause, cracking the whip through one of Irma's dummies. The weight is better than an illusion. I yank it to the floor. "What were they like? The half-fae?"

She shrugs. "Mixed bag. They aged faster, much faster. Some could lie, some couldn't. Some could cast glamours, others could *be* glamoured. You never really knew what you were going to get."

"No wonder Zera didn't like them."

"Zera does like being able to plan," Irma agrees.

"I take it you're no fan of hers either?"

"It is dangerous to comment further."

"Everything's dangerous here."

"And yet you still want to be a part of it."

I pause, before cracking my whip again. "I don't think I can go back to the mortal world and just forget all of this. It's changed me too much."

"Then, you're planning to stay down here?"

I shake my head. "There's still people up there that I love, a *world* that I love, and things I want to do, even if…"

"Your heart is down here?"

I look down. "Yes."

I crack my whip into the side of one of Irma's illusions, dispelling it in an instant. I throw myself back into the fight, and I wonder if I'm fighting against fate, too, against the stiffness of my options, the unfair absurdity of them.

If my mother is one of the fae, I wonder if she gave me up to protect me, or if it was simply because I was weak and mortal.

I jab my dagger into the side of one the dummies. Sand pools to the floor like blood.

Not so weak and mortal now, Mother.

Do thoughts like this spin through Hades' head, whenever he's in battle? He clearly despises Zera as much as I do, but I wonder if he still secretly longs for her approval, even if he knows he's far, far better than her.

I *hope* he knows.

There's scuffling along the corridor, the sound of something being dragged. A few seconds later, Hades bursts into the room, dragging a bound goblin behind him. "A present for you, my love!"

I smile. "You bring me the sweetest things."

The goblin retches. Hades kicks him into the space. I stare at him, realising what I'm expected to do.

"You don't have to—" Hades starts. "We can wait if you prefer—"

"No," I say, "I want to."

I want to get it over with. I don't want the goblin to have to stew in fear, awaiting his demise.

He must understand what is happening.

Hades clicks his fingers, and the bonds around the creature fall to the floor.

The goblin launches at me immediately, but I dart out of reach, flinging my whip round in an arch. My first attack misses, but I catch his ankle on the second, bringing him crashing to the floor. I drag him towards me. He swipes, and I leap back, forgetting he's unarmed. The whip falls from my grip.

He lunges towards it, but I punch him in the nose with my fist, making him stumble back. He blinks. I strike upwards with my dagger, not flinching, but not quite giving it all of my strength, either. It slices across his middle. Green blood splashes the floor. He reels, hissing, and it's that action that helps me gather my nerve, that anger that seasons mine.

If he'd cried out, I'm not sure I would have gone for the killing blow.

I plunge my dagger under his ribs, in the place Irma has shown me a dozen times.

Green blood spurts at the wound and at his mouth. The goblin chokes, but then his mouth twists into an awful smile.

"You haven't won, girlie." He coughs. "You cannot hope to win. We're… we're coming… for you…"

His words offer the final punch he desired, and I twist my dagger into his side to make them stop.

I do not relish the guttural pull of the muscle beneath my hands as I yank my blade free, but something else floods me, like a shift inside, a veil being pulled away. My eyes burn, and my chest tightens.

I don't fall apart this time. My knees stay strong, holding me in place as the goblin shudders still.

Irma whistles approvingly, although tutters something about dropping my whip. Hades comes forward and takes the dagger from my hand, summoning a rag to wash my fingers.

"Are you all right?" he asks, his voice soft.

"Fine."

"Are you sure? First kills can be—"

"That wasn't my first kill."

He frowns.

"I killed a goblin that attacked me when I went to send word to Emetria."

"Why didn't you say anything?"

"I was somewhat distracted by the whole you-nearly-dying thing."

"You killed for me?"

"I'd do a lot worse, for you."

He grabs me by the arms and kisses me. Irma groans, coming forward to collect the goblin and tugging it out of the room. I barely notice what she's doing, too focused on the kiss. It steadies me, anchors me to the floor, dissolving the goblin's words.

"What was that for?"

"I'm just a bit overwhelmed that anyone could care that much for me."

I slide my arms around his neck and draw him back into me. "I'm a little bit overwhelmed that more people don't," I say, holding him against my chest. I feel his heart thumping over mine, and want more than ever to slide out of my skin and combine myself with him. I kiss him again, softly and slowly, caressing the sharp curves of his cheeks.

"Did the goblin say something to you?" he asks, still resting over my heart.

I tense. “He said they were coming for me.”

Hades inches backwards. “You, specifically?”

“No. I guess he meant *us*. It was just to rattle me. I’m sure.”

Hades stares, his expression unreadable. “I don’t like vague threats, particularly when they’re aimed against you.”

“No one likes vague threats, dearest.”

At my final word, he smiles, and I know I’ve succeeded in disarming him. “Dearest?” He grins against my neck. “I do like the sound of that. I’m also open to ‘sweetheart’, ‘darling’, ‘love’…” He places a kiss to my throat with every word, travelling to my lips for a lazy kiss. I pull back slowly, his eyes bright on mine. Something in his gaze flickers for a moment.

“Have you ever been in love before?” I ask him.

He bristles. “What? No.”

“I was sure, from what you’ve said before, that you loved someone before we met—”

He goes silent for a while. “I have never loved anyone but you. I never will.”

“You’re going to live forever. I wouldn’t want you to be alone—”

“I was alone before. The only thing that’s changed is my already exceptional standards. No one is going to compete with you. No one is even going to come close.”

“I really hope you let them try.”

Hades strokes the lines of my face, his thumbs brushing my freckles. For a moment, he pauses, as if a spider has scuttled across my face, but a second later the flash of fear is gone. I can’t read his expression; he could be happy or sad or regretful or guilty and I’d have no idea.

I tell myself it doesn’t matter, and kiss him again, the goblin blood still clinging to my fingers.

Hades cleans up the blood, I restack the armoury, and he disappears for an hour or two before dinner.

I'm usually too tired to cook after an intense day of training, but I need something to distract me, so I find the energy to put together Dad's 'famous' bean stew. I stir the dish absent-mindedly, thinking of what the goblin said, of Hades' reaction to my question, of the way his eyes didn't quite meet mine after.

"Did Hades seem odd to you today?" I ask Irma.

"Boy always seems odd to me," she says, "especially around *you*." She pulls a face, and drinks her spiced tea.

Hades says nothing when he returns, other than to compliment my cooking, and he's unusually quiet when we curl up together on the sofa. I'm afraid of asking him what's wrong. Maybe, whatever he said, he didn't like the vision of me killing that creature, or maybe he feels guilty that he's brought me into this world.

Maybe he's afraid of bringing me out into the field with him, and he's looking at ways of delaying it.

Maybe he doesn't want to be with me any more.

But that night, when he holds me, it's with the desperation of the dying, like tomorrow is the day of parting, like we'll dissolve into creatures of smoke without the touch of one another. His kiss melts parts of me I didn't know were solid, and I forget all of my worries, caressing every inch of his skin.

"Are you… do you feel ready?" I ask tentatively. "Because I do."

He kisses my fingers. "Yes," he says, "but… I need another day."

"What difference can a day make?"

He kisses me, harder.

I push back. "Hades! What's going on?"

"I can't tell you. I just need you to wait a day. You'll understand soon."

"You're not planning on doing anything ridiculously romantic for my first time, are you? Because I don't need it. I don't need anything but you."

"You'll see," he says, and draws me into his arms. He smiles, but something shimmers behind it.

You can lie with a look.

'I can't tell you.' Not 'I won't.' He *can't.* What could be preventing him?

I fall into uneasy sleep.

Someone is banging at the main door. Loudly, frantically. I stir, Hades' arm around me.

"It's all right," he says, kissing my cheek, "but don't go back to sleep."

His words stir me further from unconsciousness, and I scrub my eyes as he scrambles out of bed, drawing on a glamour. "I'm coming!" he yells.

The door closes shut behind him, but I crawl up to it, pressing my ear against the gap. The main door swings open. I recognise the voice. Emetria.

"What is the meaning of this note?" she hisses.

"Keep your voice down," Hades returns calmly. "I'm sure you don't want her to hear you."

Perfectly selected words. He doesn't care if I overhear. He's encouraging it. But he can't say, 'she's asleep' because he knows that's a lie.

What does he want me to know?

"She's becoming one of us?" Emetria screeches, her voice low. "What do you mean?"

"I mean that she's becoming more fae. She's faster. Stronger. She can cast *glamours*. And sometimes, I swear her eyes are even violet. I wonder where she gets *that* from?"

Emetria goes quiet, and I hear the sound of them moving along the corridor. I wait until they're a fair distance away and then creep out, tiptoeing down to the throne room.

Violet? Was that what he had seen? What did that mean—and why summon Emetria about it?

"This isn't possible," Emetria stammers, not even trying to keep quiet anymore. "She's mortal. She *was* mortal—" She stops, staring up at him. "What did you do to her?"

Hades smiles. "Nothing she didn't beg me to."

Emetria launches across the room and smacks him in the face. It's a brutal, violent action, like nothing I've seen from her before. And he *goaded her into it*. He knew that would rattle her. "What game are you playing with her? Were you even trying to rescue her at Samhain? All this time—you knew what she was! Did you take her down here as some twisted form of revenge? To punish me?"

To punish her?

Hades' eyes darken. "There have been times in my life I have wanted to hurt you," he says, "but I would never use Persephone to do so. *Never*."

Emetria stills, and for a moment her voice vanishes altogether. When she speaks, I can hardly hear her. "You love her."

His pause hardens, into something as solid and monumental as a sculpture. "I think I have loved her since the moment you introduced us."

Wait, what?

"*I'm* not the one using her," he continues. "I suspect you might be."

"How dare you—"

"You need to tell her."

I step forward. "Tell me what?" Even though I have an awful, sickening feeling that I already know.

And when Emetria looks at me, I do. Her eyes widen, and there's something in that stare, something I almost know. A look I should have known since the day I was born.

Suddenly, she doesn't seem like this beautiful, otherworldly fae with violet eyes. A veil is lifted, or something shifts, and all at once she looks like the warm, olive-skinned woman whose picture I kept in the back of my copy of *Peter Pan,* all curves and smiles, wrapped in the arms of my father on a beach in Crete.

"Sephy—" she starts.

"No," I shake my head. "No, no, you can't be."

"Let me explain—"

"Explain?" I choke on the word. "How could you explain something like that?" I'm shaking,

thoughts, rage, sadness vibrating inside me, and every word and fear and question I've held inside me for seventeen years comes rushing out in a bitter, violent stream. "How could you not tell me? How could you just leave and take off and never see me again and—"

Emetria cuts across me. "But I did see you again," she says. "I saw you every May Day. Your father would bring you to the park, and..."

Her voice trails off, and tiny, awful pieces of my childhood, of my entire life up to this point, all click into place.

Dad taking me to Hyde Park every year on a specific date. The hazy memories of those days. The feeling that something had happened, but not the what.

"And when the day was done, you glamoured me," I realise, with a sickening thud.

I remember those days, those days of utter joy, going even in the rain. I remember ice creams and playing in the park and the colour of the skies. But nothing else.

Because you took it from me.

Emetria hangs her head. "You were mortal, you see. You grew too fast, too quickly. You were not one of us. You would never have been happy—"

I barely hear her anymore. My gaze turns to Hades, who is looking everywhere but at me.

"You—" I turn to Hades. "You knew?"

For a moment, he cannot speak. "She took me with her," he says, his voice heavy. "I've known you most of your life. The day you walked into the Samhain ball, I knew exactly who you were, and I knew that I would do anything—*anything*—to save you."

My mind flashes back to that day, to spotting him conversing in the corner with a woman. Emetria. Trying to think of a way to get me out.

"Why… why didn't you tell me?"

"I tried, but—"

"You should have tried harder!"

Hades recoils as if I've slapped him.

"It isn't his fault," Emetria explains. "I know his true name. I forbade him from ever telling you who I was."

"But… but why? Even after… When I came here, why didn't you tell me then?"

"I was worried you would want to stay. This isn't your world—"

"I get to decide where I belong!" I snap. "And I belong…" My eyes circle to Hades. *I belong with you,* I want to say, but I can't quite spit out the words, because even though he had no choice in deceiving me, everything is different than it was before, because he has this entire history with me that I just don't. Everything about our beginning unravels.

He knew who I was all along.

I don't remember when we first met.

And Emetria is my mother.

"I don't belong anywhere," I say with a sob. "I don't belong up there and I do *not* belong down here. And certainly not to either of you."

The force of my own words stings like a slap. I can't look Hades in the eyes. I can't look *either* of them in the eyes.

I turn on my heels and run.

I hear Hades starting after me. Emetria calls out to him.

"You are *not* my mother!" he snaps. "And you barely have any right to call yourself hers."

I reach my room and slam the door behind me, sliding to the floor. I bite into my sleeve to hide

my sobs, hoping he won't come, praying that he does.

He doesn't bang at the door. He doesn't even knock. But I feel him slide down on the other side, pressing against the wood.

"'Sephone," he says softly. "I wanted to tell you from the start. I *would* have told you, if I could have. I hated not being able to let you know. I tried, I really did…"

I remember his secret door, encouraging me to eavesdrop. He could not have called her my mother knowing I was listening, but he tried to get her to say something. He did. And he brought her down here with his note, refusing to keep me in the dark any longer.

So why does it still feel like betrayal? Is it just her deception, spilling into his?

That's not fair, Sephy. You know that's not fair. Just open your mouth. Explain it to him.

"You said you would never hate me for what others said or did," he says. "I didn't do *this,* Sephy. Please don't hate me for something your mother did."

My mother.

I don't hate you. I could never hate you. I'm just confused. I'm so confused.

But I can't speak. My throat is closed with sobs.

"Let me in, please. Let me see that you're all right."

But I'm not all right.

I want to let him in. I want to get up. I want to fold into his arms and have him tell me it'll be OK. But can he even speak those words?

I do not think he can, no more than I can find the strength to stand.

He stays on the other side of the door for a long, long time before finally shuffling off. My thoughts slide into some dark, cloying place where I think everything and nothing at the same time. I must stay in my room for hours, suspended in that lifeless state. I think I hold Pandora but I can't be sure.

I'm conscious of a few things, like Emetria and Hades conversing in the hall, along with Irma, although I can't catch any of their words. I'm conscious of him leaving to go on patrol, pausing ever-so-briefly at my door. I wish I had words for him.

I wish I could remember meeting him.

Eventually, the need to eat overtakes whatever numb feeling inhabits my body, and I creep into the kitchen.

Emetria is sitting at the kitchen table.

"Sephy—" she starts.

I turn on my heels.

"Sephy, please, just listen to me—"

"I can't," I tell her stiffly. "I'm not ready."

Seventeen years of waiting, and I'm still not ready. I finally have her trying to explain, and I don't want to hear.

What's wrong with me?

"I thought about you every day," she rushes, before I can leave the room. "Every single day. I lived for the one day a year when I could see you."

"Then why did you stop?" I keep my eyes trained on the door handle. "Because you did stop,

didn't you?"

A pause as hard as iron stretches between us, and I slide my gaze towards her to see if she will answer at all.

"You started asking questions," she says eventually. "You didn't just accept that I was a family friend like you used to. You started asking questions of Luliver that he couldn't answer. Literally couldn't."

Luliver.

"Why did you bring him?"

She twists her fingers around her curls, not meeting my gaze. I do that too, when I'm struggling to find the words. "Initially, because I was afraid of being seen playing with a mortal child by myself, that someone would ask questions and your identity would be revealed… I pretended I was acting as his chaperone instead."

"And then?"

"Because if ever there was a child that needed a day of playing in the sun, it was him."

I swallow, because thinking of him like that makes my heart ache in ways I'm not prepared for.

"Did Dad know?" I ask her. "What you are?"

"Yes. Not when we met, but after, when I came to him with you... I asked him to keep an eye out in case you developed any powers."

I thought I was too numb to hurt any more, but Dad lying to me cuts worst of all. I know he probably felt he didn't have much of a choice, but I feel like the foundations of my life are being stripped away, that my whole life before this point as a facade, a glamour.

"I was overjoyed when I learned I was expecting you," she rattles on, as if she's worried she won't get another chance. "Frightened, of course. I'd experienced so much in my long life, but never parenthood. I was worried as well, with you being half-fae. But most of them can pass. I thought we'd be fine, myself and my daughter. I decided I wanted to call you Persephone, after the goddess of spring… and I knew your father would approve, being a professor of classics."

Dad never told me that my mother had named me. He led me to believe it was because of his passions, and being born during spring. Another lie, tiny and insubstantial next to all the others, but a lie nonetheless.

"Then you were born, with those tiny, perfect little round ears. I could have glamoured you, I suppose, but high-ranking fae can sense glamours, and you grew so fast… too fast for any faerie. I sought out an oracle, just to be sure, but she confirmed your mortality.

"I don't know what Zera would have done if she discovered you. Abandonment at best. Death at worst. I couldn't risk it. I went to your father, explained what I was, what you weren't, and begged him to take you." She pauses, swallowing. "He didn't take much convincing. He loved you as much as I did from the moment he first saw you."

She waits for me to speak, but I still don't have the words.

"Sephy, if I'd had another choice—"

"You did," I snap. "You *did*. I understand why you felt you had to give me up, but that was seventeen years ago. You could have told me the truth before now! Instead, you let me grow up thinking that you… that I…"

"Seph—"

"You don't know what I've thought these past years! How could you possibly care about me and let me grow up thinking that you didn't want me?"

"Because I didn't think *you* wanted *me!*" she cries. "You always looked so happy with your

father—"

"Not all the time," I croak. "No one is happy all the time."

She hangs her head, and tears slide down her face. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

"Why didn't you tell me the minute I came down here, the first time you visited?"

"Honestly? I thought you were glamoured, that it wouldn't have mattered, and I wasn't sure what Luliver was trying to do with you."

"Then you should have gotten me out."

"I was going to," she says. "It killed me to leave you, that first time, but I convinced myself that whatever Luliver might have become, he wouldn't hurt you. He'd come to me at the ball, after all, searching for a way to get you out. Perhaps he was just taunting me, now. But I told myself I'd get you out during the Solstice, smuggle you away from here—"

"Did *you* send the hydra?"

She avoids my gaze. "It wasn't supposed to erupt like that. It should have been simple; just something to keep Hades and Zera occupied while I ferreted you away. Then it came in contact with Zera's magic. I didn't know it could do that. And Hades… he defended you. That was his first thought. And you seemed to want to protect him, too. So I knew you were safe, at least from him."

"He's a good person."

"I know," she says. "I was the first to know, the first to see that no matter what Zera tried to make him, he was just a boy who wanted to be loved and didn't want any part of the wickedness she tried to force on him. But he didn't show that to others easily, and when I helped him kill his father… He didn't trust me enough to let me know that everything after was just for show. I thought the power, or Zera's influence, had finally gotten to him."

I wonder if there were times he wondered if it had too, if he called himself a monster because he wasn't sure why he did what he did anymore.

And I wonder what Emetria must have felt like, watching this boy she'd half-raised and loved fall into this pit.

I shake my head. I refuse to feel sorry for her. I refuse to believe she was as trapped as she pretended.

The main door clicks open, and I freeze again, wishing I had some way of snapping back to my room without seeing him. Maybe I'll be lucky, maybe he'll slide away to his own room. I can't hear him anymore. Has he gone?

I open the door, but he's standing in front of mine. His gaze snaps to me, and he opens his mouth to speak.

I shake my head. "It's too much. I need time."

His jaw tenses. "All right. Take all the time you need."

I don't *want* to take time. I wish I could be done with processing and back to simply adoring him. I wish I could make my heart feel what my head tells me, that there was nothing he could have done, that he was not to blame, that he had gone above and beyond to try and show me the truth.

There is a difference between knowing a thing, and feeling it.

I think of reminding him of this, but he is gone before I can.

I can't bring myself to leave the room again in search of food, but a tray appears in my room almost as soon as I think about it. Hades. I can only manage a few mouthfuls before I dissolve again into sobs, because I hate that he's being so considerate when I can't even find the strength to explain to him how I feel.

I'm mad at my mother, not you.

It's not your fault.

But a part of the relationship I thought I had with you has unravelled.

I want my memories back.

I know It's not fair for me to be mad at you when you told me.

Could he really have tried any harder? He really had, even refusing to sleep with me until I knew. How could I possibly ask more of him?

If anything, I want less. I want him to be less good so I can start feeling less bad.

I cry into Pandora's fur for what feels like hours.

If he comes back, I'll tell him I'm sorry.

But he does not come, and my bed grows arctic without him.

Hades is gone by the following morning, but Emetria isn't.

"How long are you planning on staying?" I bark at her, as I help myself to orange juice.

"I wasn't there for seventeen years. I think I can give you a few more days."

"What do you think will change in that time?"

"I'm not sure. But I have to try."

Like you tried so hard before.

I take a long drink, and clunk my glass on the countertop. "I thought you had postnatal depression. That you didn't know what you were doing. I thought you'd gone back to Crete and regretted it but never been able to feel like you could come back. Maybe money was an issue. I imagined you powerless and alone." *Like me. I imagined you like me.* "But you were never powerless. You could have come for me any time."

"You can have power and still be afraid," Emetria says.

"For me?"

"Of you. Of what you could say. Of you reacting—"

Like I am now.

"You made a mistake. Not telling me sooner. And forcing Hades not to tell me."

"He was too young when he met you. I couldn't trust him otherwise. I could hardly have known that *this* was going to happen, could I?"

"You made a mistake," I repeat.

"Several, in my long life, and so many regarding you." She pauses. "You were happy though, weren't you? With Phillip? He… I wasn't wrong to leave you with him, was I?"

"No," I say, washing out my glass. "You weren't wrong there."

There's a knock on the main door, one I don't recognise. Light, firm, purposeful. It increases the longer we listen.

Irma arrives at the kitchen door. "Anyone going to answer that, or—"

I swerve round her, march down the corridor, and fling it open. The Ferryman is standing there, glamour down. "I do not wish to alarm you," he says, "but I believe we may be under attack."

I freeze. Emetria appears behind me. "Under attack?"

"Lady Emetria," he says tonelessly. "I did not expect to see you here."

"Hades," I rush, finally finding my voice, "where is he?"

"Towards the centre of the Underworld, holding them off. He isn't hurt—"

"I'm getting my weapons."

"Weapons?" Emetria calls down the corridor as I barge past her. "Persephone, what are you—"

"I'm going after him."

"You can't, you're—"

I throw open the armoury doors. "Look, you can stand there and tell me I'm being foolish and reckless all you like, but when I hear that someone I love is in danger, *I go to them.* So, *Mother*—what are you going to do?"

Emetria pauses. "Get changed," she says. "I'll load up some supplies."

I half don't want to do what she tells me to do, but I'm not about to charge off into battle in a nightdress, so I grab my daggers and whip and do what she says. I storm my closet, and find it filled for the first time with battle gear. I'd admire the pieces if I had more time, but I slide into the first dark tunic I see, strapping on flexible armour that looks moulded from bronze leaves. I buckle my weapons and braid my hair as I march towards the doors.

They do not open. I yank them again, harder than before.

"No!"

"I'm sorry, Sephy," Emetria whispers, pressed against the other side. "I'll go check on him. I won't let him be hurt. But I can't let you be hurt, either."

"Let me out!"

"I can't," she says, "and you can hate me for it all you like; you'll be alive to. But I won't lose you again, not when I have the power to save you."

"You can't do this!"

"I'm your mother," she says. "And I'll do whatever I can to protect you."

"I hate you," I spit, even though I'm not sure I do. I just want to find him. I don't want to be left behind again.

She sighs against the wood. "And I love you. Since the moment I felt you inside me."

I hear her sweep away. I bang at the door, waiting for it to unlock; yelling at it to. I don't know if she's bound it with magic or in some good old-fashioned mortal way, but I know I can't undo it. If only Dad had sent me to lock-picking school, or I could make doors like Hades—

I pause.

What if I *can* make doors like Hades?

I can glamour now. I changed my room. I altered things here. True, only Hades should have the power to make huge changes like making doors, but hadn't he once said to just ask if I needed

anything?

I press my hand to the wall. “I need a door,” I tell it. “For him. I need to get out.”

I try to imagine the wallpaper peeling away, plaster replaced by wood. Something hums beneath my fingers. I blink, and my hand fashions around a piece of brass. A doorknob. I turn it.

I emerge in the corridor. Emetria and Irma have already gone, the Ferryman doubtless with them. How will I find Hades at this rate?

Something whines at his door.

Of course.

He told me to take the dogs when he thought he was dying. At the time, I assumed it was for protection, but he took the dogs out with him sometimes on patrol. They knew the place. And they knew *him.*

I open the door, and the dogs come rushing out. Fluffy growls, but the other two stoop to licking me. I grab their faces. “Can you find him?” I ask.

They tilt their heads. I have no way of knowing if they’ve understood, if they’re even capable, but they give me a good long sniff and race for the doors. I leap after them as they exit, barely keeping up as they charge across the bridge and into the depths of the Underworld.

I keep my dagger drawn, my other hand at my whip. The deeper we go, the more *silent* it becomes, even the low wailing more subdued than before. We come across fallen skeletons, a few corpses of other things. No Hades. No signs of life at all.

What's going on?

I want to cry out, to call for him, to dispel the noiselessness, but I'm aware of how foolish that would be. Someone will be out there, someone whose attention I don't want to draw.

I stay as quiet as possible, mindful of my breathing, and try to think what Hades or Libby or Irma would do. If I imagine myself a warrior, I'll become one. If I imagine myself brave, I'll become it.

I'm not afraid, I tell myself. *I am not afraid.*

I don't give my knees a chance to tremble. I just keep walking, following the dogs, moving towards the centre.

I'm coming, I'm coming, I'm coming.

Be safe, be safe, be safe.

I turn a corner, and feel a sharpness in the air, like a shaft of wind.

The dogs pause, growling.

I shift seconds before a dagger comes slicing through the air, striking the rock behind me as if it were made of butter.

"Mortal!" shrieks a cruel, high voice. The dagger snaps back into a dark tunnel, but my eyes start to eke out a form, moving into the thin light. A long, willowy body, dressed in silver. Black hair. Eyes like gemstones.

"Dione."

She studies my outfit. "What *is* going on with you?"

"It's complicated."

"You're not glamoured."

"I am not, no."

"Were you *ever* glamoured?"

I smile. "That's not how he likes us."

She snarls. "He won't like you at all, when you're *dead*."

She moves to throw her dagger again. The dogs charge, clamping two mouths around her arm. The other goes for her head. She screams, raising her second dagger to stab them in the sides, but I fling my whip forward, catching her wrist and yanking her towards the ground. I'm about to try my luck throwing my own dagger in her direction when the tunnel behind her shakes, and a giant comes stomping into the cavern.

His club swings through the air, and I just have time to dart backwards before it strikes the ground ahead of me. He's a colossal creature, at least three times my height, and the weight of an elephant. If that club reaches me, I'm dead.

The dogs abandon Dione, launching themselves at one of its legs. Its massive knee strikes the ground, but it twists, raising its club to smash them. I scream for them to run, sprinting forward and jabbing my dagger in its huge, fleshy thigh, but it barely even registers my presence. I've brought a needle to a gunfight.

I wrap my whip around its wrist instead, but that hardly works any better. It swings me around the cavern until I roll free, landing in a heap beside Dione.

She climbs to her feet, grinning despite the blood running down her arm.

"I've never seen a mortal fight before," she says, "or fight *back*, at least. It's pathetic."

If she can say it, I suppose it must be true.

She raises her dagger above me.

I kick her in the stomach and send her reeling back. She staggers, winded. I thank my silent stars for giving me a friend like Libby.

"Not… bad… for a… mortal…" she wheezes.

I rise above her, forcing a grin. "I'm not mortal."

I can feel something peeling away from my face, but I don't know what it is. All I know is that I can see it in *her* face, her expression.

"No," she says. "It's not possible."

The dogs whimper, and I wheel towards them without thinking. The giant is towering over them.

Dione uses the distraction to lunge at me with her dagger.

I see her in time to move, but not to get free. I'm spared a stab wound, but the blade slices my thigh. Blood spurts across the cave floor.

Irma taught me how to fight, how to wield a whip, a blade. She taught how to run.

She did not teach me pain.

I scream and drop to the floor.

"Sephy!"

Hades.

He streams through the mouth of the tunnel, knocking Dione off her feet and punching her in the face. I roll out of the way, scrambling for her dagger, as he beats her into a bloody pulp, fangs bared, eyes red. Dione laughs the entire time, her cackles punctuated by his blows.

"Hades!" I yell. "The dogs!"

He does not seem to hear me. I tug at his arm, but it's like tugging at stone. I scream his name again.

When that still doesn't work, I whisper in his ear. "Luliver," I say softly. "Please stop."

He draws back, his shoulders sloping, the redness in his eyes abating. "You're all right."

I nod. "The dogs…"

He looks up, and spots them in the light, still doing their best to avoid the giant's strikes, even though one of their paws is crushed. He leaps forward without another word, leaving me with Dione.

She spits blood on the ground, barely moving, still laughing.

"I knew he was a monster," she cackles. "Like me, deep down. He's one of us."

"He is *nothing* like you." I brandish her weapon in my hand. I'm not sure where its twin has gone, or if she has the strength to draw it to her.

She looks up at me through one, bloodied eye. "Are you going to kill me, then?"

"No," I say quietly, "I'm not like you."

I slice the blade across her cheek, the metal searing her flesh, and do not relish the howl she

makes.

"Bitch!" she seethes.

"I didn't say I was perfect."

I throw her dagger out of reach and grasp my own, trying not to think about what I've done, the fact I've just scarred her for the rest of her immortal life. I hobble out of the tunnel, clutching onto the dogs as Hades weaves around the giant.

The tunnels lurch again.

"No," Hades whispers.

An ogre is running at top speed towards us, accompanied by several trolls, and a horde of goblins and redcaps. They'll be on us in seconds.

He dives out of the way of another attack, plunging his sword through the giant's arm and slicing it across the torso as he withdraws. As it staggers, he smashes his fists together almost in prayer, and blue light streams through the room. The collapsed bones reanimate. Others tumble out the stone.

They stream down the tunnels, beating back the forces. But it's not enough. We're still outnumbered.

Hades slumps against the floor.

"Hades!"

"*Run!"* he hisses.

But I can't. Injured leg aside, I *can't*. I'd be leaving half of myself behind.

The dogs whine, looking at me, but I nod.

"Go," I urge.

They're smaller, faster, even on three legs. I only have one good one. They whimper regretfully and shoot off down one of the tunnels. Hades stares at me, and his eyes dart around the chamber, every entrance, every tunnel.

Just before they can reach us, he takes hold of me, shoots us into the air, and rolls us inside another cavern. A huge club rises up to follow us, but Hades seizes a rocky wall and yanks it down as if it weighs no more than a curtain.

We plunge into darkness.

The room stills, the sounds below lessening. For a long moment, we lie against the floor, breathing heavily. I wait for the world to make sense again, but it doesn't happen. Pain pulses at my thigh.

Hades grabs me. "Are you hurt?" he asks.

My eyes adjust quickly to the gloom, to purple-blue light that inhabits this chamber. Hades is holding my face, but I can't yet make out much else. I wonder if my transformation into half-fae is complete, if my eyes are doomed to be this weak forever.

"My leg," I rush.

He's tearing something up, wrapping it around my thigh. I grip his arms as he does so and try not to scream.

"What's going on?" I ask him, gritting my teeth.

"We're under attack."

"Gee, genius, I got that part. From who? Dione doesn't seem like much of a mastermind—"

"No," he says, "she doesn't."

"So who—"

"I have an idea. What are you doing here?"

"The Ferryman said you needed help—"

"Charon? I didn't send him—"

"You didn't need to."

He sighs, rising to his feet. He moves his hands over the rocky walls.

"What are you doing?"

"Searching for a way out. Only I'm not sure there is one. I can't obliterate huge chunks of rock, only thin segments."

"So, we're trapped?"

He slumps down, a little way off. Something shudders in the distance.

"How long—" I start.

"I'm not sure."

Moments tick by, the seconds slipping away from us. I don't know what's going to happen when they break through, or how long that will take, or how much energy he has left to fight with. I don't know what will await us.

There's so much I have to say, so much I have to know.

I crawl closer to him, not quite touching. "Tell me about when we first met," I ask him.

"Why?"

"I want to picture it."

He sighs, but with a kind of bittersweet relief, like he's wanted to tell this story all his life, only never imagined telling it like this. "You were six years old, nearly seven. You were wearing these pink dungarees with a polka-dot hem, and flowers stitched all over. I stumbled on your name, and you told me to call you Sephy. You gave me your hat because you were worried I'd get sunburn. You forgot to take it back afterwards and I wore it until it fell to pieces. You were the nicest, loveliest person I'd ever met, and I cried afterwards when Emetria explained you wouldn't remember me."

He pauses, and my throat feels tight, too. I remember those dungarees. I remember losing my hat. I hated not remembering *him*.

"After that day, I lived for the first of May, when Emetria would take me with her to see you. It barely mattered that you didn't remember me, because each time you seemed to be kinder than the last. My heart broke when Emetria said I couldn't see you anymore, but she forgot to make me promise, and I went back anyway. And so did you. Even when your father said you were too old, you went back, and I dared to believe it was because deep down, you wanted to see me too. You couldn't remember why you had to go, but you knew it was important."

The same feeling tugs at my heart now.

"One day, I asked to walk you home, and afterwards, sometimes, I'd come and watch you for a moment on your roof garden, tending to the plants and feeding the pigeons, like some kind of princess from a story.

"As I got older, I knew how weird it was, how much I'd built you onto this pedestal, made you out to be the best of all people. I knew I must have half-invented the sort of person you were, that if I was truly in love with you, I was in love with an idea, a fantasy I'd conjured up to keep me company. Then the halloween before last, I snuck away from the Samhain celebrations to see if I could find you. I saw some goblins following you as you made your way home. You must give off some interesting scent. I fought them, but I knew I couldn't always be around to protect you. I purchased this amulet that was meant to guard against enchantments; I didn't know it would only work against glamours. I left it where I thought you'd find it."

It seems wild and mad and crazy that I don't remember any of this. "You let me think my mother

gave it to me."

"I was trying to put into your head that it wasn't a coincidence we met. Because I think, somehow, someone or something wanted you to go to that revel. When I saw you there… it was like a kind of death. I knew I had to get you out, that I couldn't let you be chosen… So I tricked you into drinking the wine, and interrogated the other mortals to try and find one I thought would make a better sacrifice. I was still desperately hoping Emetria would come up with a better plan, but there wasn't enough time…" He shakes his head. "I got you out. I brought you back here. And I was terrified. Certain that you would hate me, nervous that you wouldn't. Scared that you wouldn't live up to my expectations when I so desperately needed to believe that there was something real and good in this world. I'd built you up as this mortal goddess, and now you were here, and alive, and… and just as wonderful as I hoped you'd be. I loved the core of you just as much as the vision I'd been sure I created, and despite everything… you seemed to like me too."

He takes a breath, long and slow. *Like* him? I don't even remember a time when I merely *liked* him. I half doubt such a time even existed.

I'm still confused about my mother, but I'm so much less confused about him. He's been a secret constant my entire life, an angel in the shadows. I'm slipping further in love with him by the second.

"And if something happens to you, I swear I will become every bit the monster my mother tried to make me, because my heart will die with yours."

"Hades—"

"And I'm going to live forever, whereas you… who knows how long you'll have?" He sighs. "I hate loving you. Sometimes I think it was easier before I really knew you, easier to bear the death of a dream than the death of someone real and true, but… I wouldn't have it another way. I would hate never having known, never having loved you, even more."

Something groans against the caved-in pile.

"How long do you think we have?" I ask him.

"Not long," he rushes. "Not very long at all. But maybe long enough to install a fall back plan."

He looks at me, the gloom finally lifted. His eyes glint with a dark, desperate kind of mischief.

"What is it?"

"You're not going to like it."

"No. No, no, *no*. Absolutely not. I won't agree to it."

"It's your best option—"

"Mine, yes, maybe. But yours?"

He blinks, as if he hadn't expected me to consider this. "It's just in case we don't find another way. A last resort."

"Will it even work? I'm part mortal—"

"There's enough fae in you for this, I'm sure of it."

The hammering gets closer.

"We're running out of time. Sephy, *please*. If they get hold of you and we don't have this in place, you *know* I will do anything to save you. I can't have that option. And… and it's not just about us. The fate of the world might depend on your agreeing."

I look down, knowing I can't refuse. "I hate you for making me do this," I whisper, my throat feeling like shredded glass. "I hate you so much, I—"

I'm not sure who moves first, if I crawl into him or he cuts me off. We both seem just as surprised, just as desperate, when our lips meet, and we kiss like the world is on fire. We're both trembling, and I'm terrified of stopping, of falling into the void that will open beneath me without him. He clasps my hand in his, and I feel my wrist burning, but I kiss through it all, not caring about anything but him.

He breaks away first. "Even if you do hate me," he says quietly, stroking my cheek, "my heart is still yours; it always has been. Do with it what you will."

The rocks explode.

He knows I don't really hate him, right?

Hades erupts into something else; a huge, winged, feathered creature, fanged and red-eyed and larger than ever. He attaches himself to the giant arm breaking through the seal, but another hand grabs him by the throat and flings him to the other side of the cave. I race to cover him, ignoring the sting in my leg, but a dozen pixies flood the room, dressed for battle. I crack my whip, trying to keep them back. It's no good. There's too many.

Hades grabs me in his arms, wrapping his wings around me, the rest of his form shrinking away. He starts to scream, and his wings are pulled back, the pixies sinking their teeth into his muscle, clawing his face. I scramble for him, but more hands are wrapping around me, dragging me to the floor.

"Stop, no, don't hurt him!"

I scream his name, he screams mine. His feathers are thick with blood. I see a flash of something white, and his wings slump to the floor with an awful, twisted scream.

They go nowhere. I don't think he can make them vanish when they're damaged, and right now…

Any other creature would never fly again.

"I think that's enough, don't you?"

Zera arrives in the cavern, floating up on the air. She's dressed in armour, but it's beyond pristine. All for show.

"Mother," says Hades, spitting blood, "I wish I could say I was surprised."

Zera comes towards him and crouches down at his side. She raises her hand underneath his chin, skirting his flesh. He grimaces, inching away from her touch. She's wearing some kind of gauntlet, its ends tipped with golden claws.

Celestial steel.

I remember the scars on Hades' back.

I am going to kill her.

"Play nicely, my son," she says.

"I'll do as you taught me."

For a moment, I think she's going to slap him, but instead she wheels around and lifts me up by the throat, crushing my windpipe with her steely hand. I can't breathe. My throat feels like it's cracking.

"Stop!" Hades howls, his voice breaking against my ears. "Don't hurt her! I'll… I'll do anything—"

Zera smiles, and she drops me to the floor. I cough and splutter, my neck raw. I can't speak.

"I was so hoping you'd say that," she says. "Grab them both. Don't hurt the girl. Not yet."

Before anyone can grab me, I race to Hades' side. I seize his ruined face in my hands and wish there was a way to kiss him without hurting him. I'm dragged back before I can find a way, and I can't even speak to let him know that I love him, or ask him not to do this.

They drag us outside the cavern, binding our hands, and take us to the river. The Ferryman is waiting there with his longboat. For a split second, my heart rejoices, until Zera loads us into the vessel without a word.

He's here for her.

"Why?" I croak.

"Because she offered me something that no one else could," he says. "Humanity."

"But… you helped me. Before when he—"

"It seemed like the human thing to do."

I look down. "How could you?"

"I'm sorry, if that matters," says the Ferryman. "Or at least, I think I soon will be."

Zera grins again as we push off from the shore. A few goblins sit in the boat with us, and our ride is flanked by pixies. Even if we were free of our shackles, there's nowhere we could run.

Where are Irma and Emetria?

"I approached Charon after my last little attempt," Zera says. "He wasn't interested in jewels or power, but everyone has a price."

"What was he supposed to do?" Hades asks. "Kill me?"

"My past attempts haven't proven particularly successful in that regard," Zera says. "So I thought that I would try something different. I don't need you *dead,* after all. I just need you to open the way to Tartarus."

"Unleashing actual Hell, Mother? So cliché."

"It's not hell I seek, boy, but the titans, and all their glorious power. For too long, we have lived in the shadows of mortals when we once reigned as gods. But no more. And never again."

Hades swallows. "Why do you think I'll help you?"

Zera scrapes a claw under my chin. "Because you said you'll do *anything*."

Hades tenses. He looks at the Ferryman. "You told her about me and Persephone."

"He told me *everything*," Zera croons. "So you will open the gate, without fuss, or I will start dismembering your human pet until you do."

My insides ice, and Hades stiffens beside me. "All right," he says.

"All right… what?"

"I will open the gate for you."

"And make no attempt to close it until I ask you to?"

His next words are wrenched from him. "And make no attempt to close it, until you ask me to." He hangs his head.

Zera smiles. "Good."

We glide through the waters towards the gates to Tartarus, Hades slumped against me. I wish there was a way for me to hold onto him, but I'm too tightly bound. I wish there was something for me to do, but there isn't. I'm no great warrior, no strategist. I can't think my way out of this. We're outnumbered and outmatched.

The gates swim into view. The Cerberus guarding it has been slain, their blood dripping down the steps into the river. Hades lets out a low moan, which turns into a cry of pain as he's yanked from the boat and thrown against Ares and Athena, who come out to greet us. Apollo and Artemis are there too, with Aphron supporting a bloodied Dione. They're flanked by a small army of trolls and other creatures.

And Emetria.

"Lady Emetria," Zera says. "What a surprise. I didn't think you approved of my ambitions."

Emetria bows. "I know where my loyalties lie," she says, but for a second, her eyes rest on me before circling to Zera. "I know who my true monarch is."

You can lie with a look.

"Happy to hear it."

For one hopeful second, I think she's going to fling me towards her, that she can cut me loose, that she'll have a plan in place, but I'm shoved towards Artemis instead.

I struggle. "No—"

"Sephy—" Hades starts.

"No!"

I break towards him, slamming my head against his chest.

"Don't forget what you promised," he rushes.

"Don't forget that I can lie."

I'm yanked backwards, my arms held in Artemis' solid grip. "Don't struggle," she says.

But I have to struggle. I have to struggle because if there's even the slightest chance I can get free, I have to do it. I can't let myself be used as a bargaining chip. I can't let Zera open the pit. I think of my dream, of the playground of ashes, and the overwhelming power of the titans striking through the streets of London. Through home. Through the world.

I'd rather be dead.

And Hades…

Will she honestly let him live after he opens the way?

"Will you kill him?" I ask her. "Afterwards, when he's done what you've asked, will you kill him?"

Zera snorts. "If he does what I ask, he can live as long as the rest of us."

Hardly a promise, but she won't kill him outright, if he does what he's told. We can survive this. Scarred and different and facing a world neither of us wants to see, but we can survive.

There's no need for me to make good on my promise. I won't need to run. I don't have to abandon him.

Ares throws Hades into the centre of the circle. "No time like the present, little brother," he says, although he winces slightly at the state of his ruined wings. He glances back at his mother.

She nods. "Open it."

Hades sighs, and turns to me.

No.

"Stop," says Emetria.

A dozen eyes snap towards her.

"My Queen, I beg you to reconsider. We have no way of knowing what the titans will—"

Lightning crackles at the ends of Zera's fingertips, but it's live in her eyes, too, wild and biting. "You told me you knew where your loyalties lay," she says.

"That was no lie," Emetria replies.

"Then where do they lie?"

"With my daughter," she says, and steps to my side.

Aphron gasps, clasping their hands to their face. A few of the others make similar sounds. But not Artemis.

Or Zera.

Something else in Zera's eyes flickers, but she does not betray it. Instead, she smiles. "My, my, Emetria, quite the turn of events. You know what the penalty is for concealing a fae child from the court."

"I do," she says, "but you are not my queen."

A murmur falls upon the crowd, and something in Zera snaps, because she *is* the queen, because how can Emetria possibly have found another? She raises her hand, but Apollo's spear knocks it down. Lightning spits along the floor.

"You?" Zera hisses.

"I'm sorry," Apollo says, "but I cannot allow you to do this."

Ares breaks away from Hades, his claymore slicing upwards. Aphron gasps again, dragging Dione away from the chaos as the small army advances.

Artemis flings me backwards, and I realise my hands have been cut loose. "Run!" she hisses, and I scramble backwards as a volley of arrows soars overhead.

Her archers, hiding on the ledges above us.

I know I'm supposed to escape, that I promised Hades I would run at the first available opportunity, but my eyes go to him, not the exit. He's slumped against the circle, barely moving, but he shakes his head wildly when my eyes lock onto his.

"No," he says, "run—"

And I do run. I run towards him.

Half a dozen goblins cut across my path, but I don't have my daggers. I have nothing I can use at all. I dart backwards, racing round the outside of the circle, stopping when I get to Arphron's side. They're still clinging to Dione, but let out a squeak when I remove the whip attached to their belt.

"She stole my immortal weapon," Aphron gasps. "Dione, did you see—"

I slice through the air with the whip, gold tendrils sparking across the stone. The goblins stay back.

They're the only ones that do. Everything else is a blur of limbs and steel and lightning, and the air pulsates with sound.

Someone grabs my arm. I drop the whip, struggling against the vice-like hold.

"Emetria!" calls Ares. "I have your daughter!"

Emetria stills.

"You owe me a favour," he says. "You are bound by your word. Make no further action against my mother until Lord Hades has opened the seal."

Emetria doesn't move. She cannot, bound by her bargain with Ares, but also, I realise, by another promise. One she made to me that I can't recall, long, long ago.

"Stand down," she says to the rest of the forces. "Do it!"

"My Lady—" starts Artemis.

Emetria shakes her head. "Please, Artemis. Not my child. Do not ask me to sacrifice my child."

Artemis gives the order, and her archers stand down.

I should have run. This is my fault. Whatever happens next, my fault.

"Hades," Ares growls, "open the seal."

He presses against my windpipe, and I can't even scream to tell Hades not to do it. All I can do is watch as his gaze flickers in defeat, and I know exactly what he plans to do.

Hades holds out his hand, and his weapon slowly materialises in his grip. He keeps his eyes on me the entire time, even as the blade strikes the centre, and the entire earth beneath us shakes.

The seal starts to crumble. I wriggle from Ares' arms. He no longer cares about holding me; he has what he wanted.

Tartarus is open.

Chunks of light break through the floor, the rest of the seal dissolving like a biscuit in the mire. Hades makes no attempt to move as he starts to slip, not even as I scream his name.

He slides out of view. I lurch forwards, snatching up the abandoned whip and snagging his wrist as he falls. I'm dragged across the stone, stopped only at the last second by Apollo grabbing my waist.

Hades is over the edge, held onto this world only by the whip in my grasp. I spare a split second to be grateful that it's caught his sleeve and not his flesh, that I'm not causing him any further pain. His eyes circle up to mine.

"Sephy," he says, "you need to let go."

"No. No, I don't."

"You have to let me fall. You heard Zera's words. I can't close it unless she orders me too. If I don't—"

"Please," I choke on the word, "don't ask me to… *I get to decide when to let you go, Luliver!* And it's not now. It's not ever. I won't let you go. I swear it."

He smiles, and it is the worst, most wretched smile of my life. The smile of defeat. The smile of a dying man offered a second of reprieve.

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me," I hiss. "Thanking me sounds like goodbye. Don't thank me! *Get up!"*

I can order him too. I know his name. I can *make* him be selfish, force him to come with me, damn the rest of the world. I don't care about it. I don't care about anything but him.

I hold out my free hand, straining against Apollo. "Please," I say quietly, stretching my fingers as far as they will go, "*please*. Just take my hand. We'll find another way to solve this. Take my hand. Just take it. It'll be fine. It'll be fine, just…"

Tears slid down my nose, dropping over his bloodied cheeks. His gold eyes glisten.

"I love you, Persephone," he says, and pulls back on the whip until it snaps from my grip.

He falls slowly, his great ruined wings splayed out behind him, loose feathers dislodging into the air between us. His eyes stay on mine as he plummets, until he vanishes into the fierce white light beneath.

"*No!"* I howl, and even though it's stupid, and foolish, and makes no sense, I try to bolt after him. Apollo holds me back, but I fight against him. It's like punching rock, struggling against stone, but then… his arms grow weaker. My hits harder. He drops away from me, eyes round with surprise.

Strength, warmth, *power* floods my body, pulsing from my wrist. It's like my blood has been turned to lava. The earth seems like a part of my skin as it rumbles beneath me.

"What—" Zera stills.

The pit is still shaking behind me, but so is something else. My back is burning, trembling with energy. Something pushes out of my skin.

Wings of bronze unfurl along my shoulder blades, reaching towards the sun I know must be above, somewhere, even when the air around me throbs with dense, dark cold. They're huge, heavy, muscular. I buckle beneath their weight.

"It's not possible," Ares says. "She… she can't be…"

I turn towards the hole. I have wings now, I can reach him, I can find him—

A hand grabs my wrist. Emetria again.

She shakes her head. "You're not ready to fly."

And she's right, of course. I have no idea how to use these extra limbs, they're so heavy I can barely move them. I have no idea if I can even lift Hades if I can find him.

"But I'm not ready to let him go," I tell her, my voice like a child's.

Her violet eyes are lined with silver. "I know," she says, "but you have to seal the hole. You know you do."

If you cannot run, he'd said, back in that cavern when he'd explained his plan, *if you cannot get away in time, and she forces me to open it, seal the hole.*

But if I seal it, how will I get him back?

"I can't," I tell her.

"You can," she says. "You will. You're the Queen of Hell, now."

The Queen of Hell.

Not Lady. Queen. I think back to the crowns on the wall of that cavern, and Emetria's words about Zera not being her queen. She has pledged her allegiance to another.

I do not feel like a queen. I feel lost and heavy, but before I can surrender to that feeling, the earth shakes again.

I'm sorry, I whisper inwardly. *But I know what you'd want me to do.*

Only a thin precipice of rock connects the centre of the seal to the rest of the space. Hades' sword is still stuck in the centre.

Only it's not his sword anymore.

It's mine.

When I reach out to take it, when I slide it out of the ground, the blade transforms into something thin and light.

A rapier.

I raise it over my head. The pieces of the seal snap upwards, fixing back together like a puzzle. The trembling stops. The physical world stills.

Mine continues to crash.

"No!" Zera howls. "No! You will open it again, you will—"

I wait for Ares to call in his favour, but he doesn't even try. His face is a mask of horror, and I know he didn't expect Hades to do this, or his mother to go this far.

I raise my hands to the fallen, to the corpses studded with arrows, to the Cerberus down on the banks. I can feel their muscles twitching at my command, stirring at the unbridled power flooding my veins. The bodies start to shake, drawing upright.

"You are outnumbered," I say to Zera, "leave this place at once."

"I will have what I came for!"

"You will have *nothing!*" I snarl, and my wings, taking on some life of their own, fan out and rise above me. *You will have nothing, like I have.*

Athena tugs at Zera's elbow. "I would counsel retreat, Your Majesty. We can regroup, replan."

Zera looks at the bloody Cerberus, at the milk-white eyes of the creatures she killed, and slowly backs away. My eyes follow her, my thoughts elsewhere. My army tightens around me, and I force them to stand strong.

I want to pass out. The world feels shapeless enough, my vision dark. But I can't collapse. And not because I'm brave or determined enough to stay standing. I stand strong because the power flooding through me is like a solid mass, something that has replaced my bones and muscles even when the rest of me has slithered away.

I'm less alive than a skeleton.

At the bank, the Ferryman is waiting beside his vessel. "I did what you asked," he says to Zera. "I got her out of the palace. You promised me my humanity."

Somehow, Zera manages a smile. "I did, didn't I?" she says. "Very well, you shall have it."

She strikes him in the chest with her fist, lightning flooding his body. He screams, his body spasming like an electrified spider. He doubles back, coughing, clutching at his chest. He holds out his hands in horror.

He is still a monster.

"No," he says, "no, please, this isn't what I wanted…"

"You asked for humanity," she said, "a pretty body was never part of the deal. You will know what it is like to be human, Charon. To suffer. To be weak, and vain, and afraid… and to know always that you asked for this."

His howls fill the enormous space, a worthy illustration of how I feel inside.

Hades is gone.

I didn't tell him that I loved him.

But he knew. He knew, right?

In the cave, I told him? I let him know I didn't blame him? I told him I was sorry?

No. No, I let *him* speak. I let him fill up our time with telling me he loved me, when I already knew, when *he* was the one that needed convincing, deserved to know—

"Sephy," says Emetria, "we're back."

We step out of the boat ahead of the palace gates. Artemis' hunters are there to greet us, together with Irma, a few nymphs and pixies, other creatures I'm not sure of. The dogs are there too, limping forward to greet me. All three bury their heads against my neck as I stoop to embrace them.

I place my hand to their wounded paw, the power sloughing off me. I imagine the muscles and bones beneath their skin, and think of knitting, of pushing things together.

I will fix one thing today, I promise. *One small, insignificant thing.*

My fingers radiate with warmth and light, and the dogs yap with delight.

This is not a Hades power. This I got from my mother.

I stand up again. The crowd is staring at me, and I take a second to stare back, to process what's going on.

"You're running a rebellion," I realise.

Emetria nods. "Yes."

"Against Zera."

"Yes."

"Did Hades know?"

Emetria looks down.

"Why didn't you—"

"Because we were never sure where his allegiances truly lay," Artemis interrupts. "He made little secret of his feelings for his mother, but she was still his mother, and he was still young. There was always the chance he might use us to seek a reconciliation with her. And besides, he really has done an excellent job of looking the villain these past years. Can you blame us?"

Yes. Absolutely. But no more than I can blame myself.

I open the doors. It occurs to me that no one but Hades should be able to open them, but I've always been able to. He gave me that power long before he marked me, long before anything.

Hades.

I am the reigning Hades now.

The name fills me with horror. *It's not mine, it's his, I don't want it, take it away!*

"I take it you want to use this place as your new headquarters, now that you've gone public with your allegiances?" I say to Emetria, as we pass over the threshold.

"If you don't mind."

"I do not mind," I say, drifting towards the throne room. "You may do whatever you want with this place. You can ask anything of me, do anything to me. But I have a condition."

Emetria swallows. "Yes?"

"When we raise a force large enough, I'm opening the seal again, and I'm going into Tartarus to get him out."

"Sephy, we don't even know that—With your powers manifesting it's almost certain that he—"

"Luliver's alive," I tell her. "He fell into Hell, into the deepest pit. Another realm. The world only *thinks* he's dead, but he's not."

"Seph—"

I roll up my sleeve. The Mark of Hades sits on my wrist, but it's only half-formed. Half silver, half black.

Because it isn't fully mine. I'm sharing it.

An invisible shudder of relief passes over Emetria's face. Apollo looks relieved too, and Irma. Even Artemis' shoulders relax, just a little.

"He's alive," I say, more resolutely, "and I would like your help to get him back."

Emetria bows her head. "Anything," she says. "I'll do anything."

The dogs nudge my hands. I look around, and see the hall swamped with people. A court. A rebellion against Zera, against whatever else she has planned. I wish I had some stirring words for them, but I don't. And besides, Emetria is the leader. Not me. I'll be a figurehead if that's what they want. I'll be *anything* they want, as long as they help me.

I walk up to the dais, to the throne of bones. As I touch it, black vines twist through the design, forming thorns and roses. I raise my fingers across my armour, and melt it into a gown. A crown springs at my head.

I don't want this. I don't want any of it. I just want *him.* The sheer magnitude of the loss is murmuring behind the wave of shock, and any minute now, it's going to crash. Any minute now I'll understand what's just happened.

But not just yet.

I lower myself into the seat, and try not to think of where he is.

"All hail the Queen of Hell," said Artemis, bowing before me.

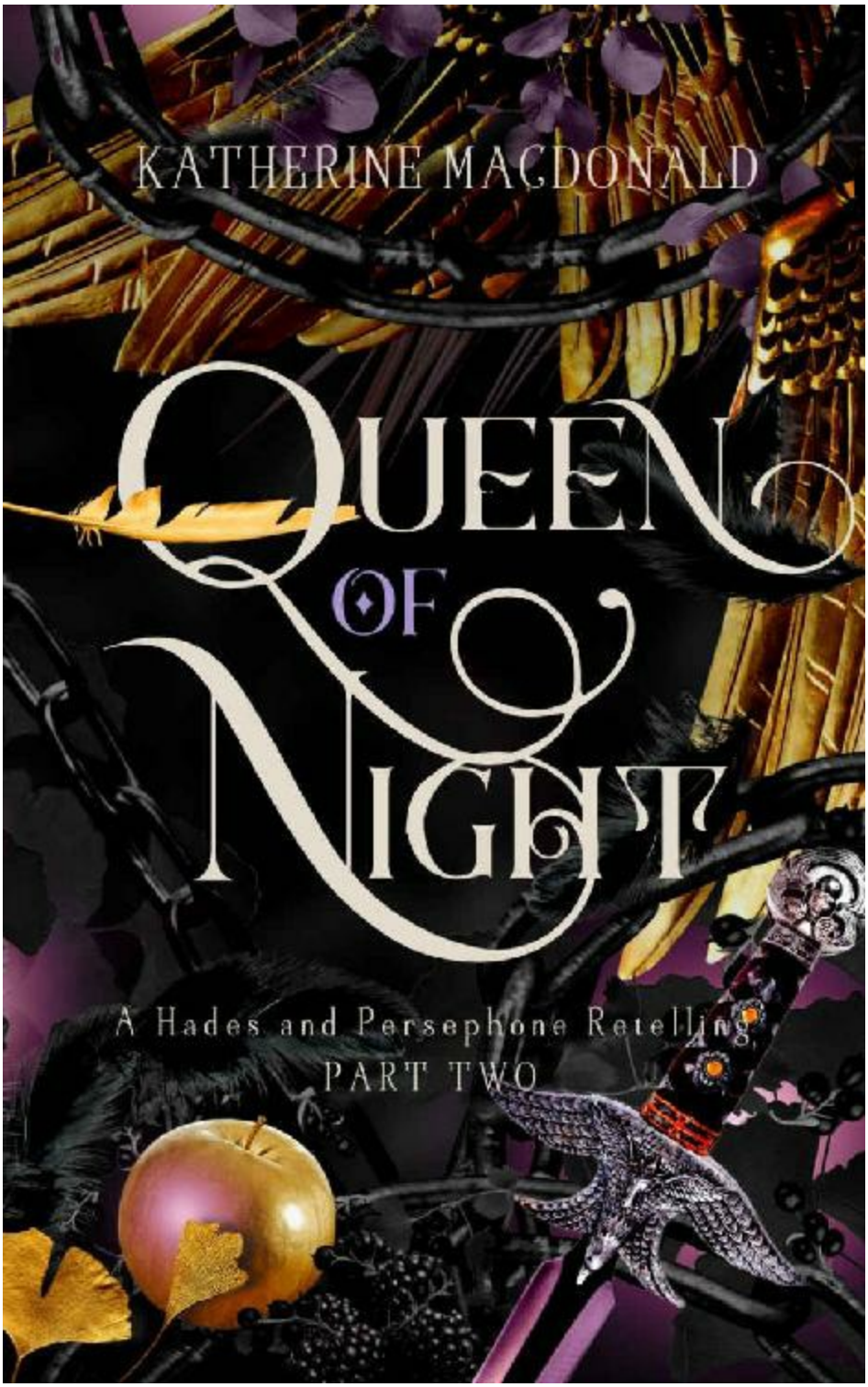
I close my eyes, banishing all tears, forcing them back for just a little longer.

I'm coming, Luliver. I'm coming. Just hold on. I'm getting you back.

Whatever it takes.

The story continues in Part II: Queen of Night

Part 2 coming 21st July



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Acknowledgements

So many thanks to my glorious beta readers, Lydia, Rebecca, Lucy, KC, Lynn, Alice and Elisha, with particular thanks to Lydia, who inspired this project with our mutual love of faeries, and to Rebecca, for her absolute unbridled enthusiasim. I adore the cover for this and genuinely think it might be your best yet. Also thanks for your title suggestion!

Also thanks to Morgan, Emma, Tara, Charlotte and Faye, lovers of Holly Black, who gave fantastic feedback on the first three chapters. It was very much appreciated, and I hope you enjoy the final product.

About The Author

Katherine Macdonald

Born and raised in Redditch, Worcestershire, to a couple of kick-ass parents, Katherine "Kate" Macdonald often bemoaned the fact that she would never be a successful author as "the key to good writing is an unhappy childhood".

Since her youth, Macdonald has always been a storyteller, inventing fantastically long and

complicated tales to entertain her younger sister with on long drives. Some of these were written down, and others have been lost to the ethers of time somewhere along the A303.

With a degree in creative writing and six years of teaching English under her belt, Macdonald thinks there's a slight possibility she might actually be able to write. She may be very wrong.

She currently lives in Devon with her manic toddler in a cabin in the woods.

“Thief of Spring” is her 11th novel.

You can follow her at @KateMacAuthor, or subscribe to her website at www.katherinemacdonaldauthor.com to be notified of new releases and free review copies!